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1

The
CONQUEROR
from a Dying Kingdom

The illustration depicts a young woman with long, flowing blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a blue and white dress with a gold belt. She is looking towards the right. Next to her is a young man with short brown hair and green eyes, wearing a green tunic and brown pants. He is looking towards the left. They are standing in a landscape of ruins, with a large, broken stone structure in the background. The overall style is a soft, painterly anime aesthetic.



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The
CONQUEROR
from a Dying Kingdom

The illustration depicts two characters in a desolate, ruined landscape. On the left, a young woman with long, flowing blonde hair and blue eyes stands with her hand to her forehead, looking distressed. She wears a blue dress with a white collar and a yellow necklace. On the right, a young man with short brown hair and green eyes looks off to the side. He wears a green tunic with a red sash and dark pants. The background shows crumbling stone structures and a hazy, purple-tinged sky. The title 'The CONQUEROR from a Dying Kingdom' is overlaid in the center, with 'CONQUEROR' in large white letters and 'Dying Kingdom' in red letters. A large red number '1' is in the top right corner.

C O N T E N T S

❧ | Prologue _____

Chapter 1 ❧ | Birth _____

Chapter 2 ❧ | The Succession Council _____

Interlude ❧ | The Night Following the Turmoil _____

Chapter 3 ❧ | Everyday Happenings _____

Chapter 4 ❧ | Knight Academy _____

Prologue

When I woke up in my bed that morning, I was still feeling kinda sleepy.

I had nothing in particular to do that day—no games that I wanted to play, no books I wanted to read badly enough to make me shake off my weariness and win against the urge to sleep. I had no reason to get up, and there was nothing I could do about that. Once I'd decided to give in, all I had to do was let my weary brain have its way, and I soon drifted off again.

By the next time I woke up, there couldn't have been more than a few minutes left until the afternoon. My tiredness was gone, and now I was thirsty. I sat up in bed. After looking at the clock, I reckoned that I'd slept a whole nine hours. *Looks like it's yet another day of me being a good for nothing*, I told myself.

The thought made me feel uncomfortable, so I headed to the washbasin to wash my face.

The air was bitingly cold as I stepped out of the heated room. I was a bachelor living alone in a wooden, single-story house that must have been built around 1960. My grandfather, a college professor, had originally chosen it as a place to enjoy his retirement, so it had been renovated when he'd left his job. The place had previously been occupied by a quiet old couple. On the surface, the house still looked to be in fairly good shape, but unsurprisingly, it had begun to creak rather loudly as of late. Though that wasn't an immediate concern, I knew I wouldn't be able to live here my whole life.

I wasn't feeling hungry, but I had to do something with the leftover rice I'd cooked yesterday. I took what was left in my rice cooker and made it into chazuke—rice tea soup.

While my food digested, I turned my attention to an online game I'd been playing recently and caught up with the community. I was beginning to get bored of the game, but it would be good enough for killing time for a while yet. Ever since I'd quit my job to become a no-lifer, I'd found myself with far too

much time on my hands. A way to fill the endless days was just what I needed.

When I logged on to the game, I found it empty—it was the middle of the day, after all. So, I went back to another game I'd bought a month earlier. Since I'd already cleared it, all that remained were some required tasks for one hundred percent completion, but it had been an enjoyable game and those tasks were fun in their own way.

Back when I had a job, the time between game release cycles felt too short compared to the little leisure time I had, and the list of games I'd wanted to play would continuously grow. Once I'd quit my job and turned my life into nothing but free time, however, I'd rapidly cleared that backlog. Now, the long wait for release cycles was agonizing.

Once the sun was setting, I logged on to the online game again. After taking a break to eat dinner and take a bath, I played until around 3 a.m. By that point, I was tired, so I went to bed.

My bank balance barely declined because I lived such a simple life. It meant that I felt no sense of urgency, and each lazy day that passed was no improvement over the one before.

As fun as it was, I felt as though some part of my mind was blurry, and as though my life carried the sweet yet putrid odor of rotting fruit. It was a vaguely unpleasant feeling, but I was reluctant to break free from this dormant state and once again give everything my all. I simply trusted myself to the abundance of time, and I soon fell asleep.



When I woke up the next morning, my mind felt unusually sharp and alert, as though I couldn't have possibly slept a single minute longer. I checked the clock on the wall and found that it wasn't particularly late. I had to conclude that my physical fatigue had lined up nicely with my body clock to allow me some good quality sleep.

After washing my face, I decided against sitting in front of my computer desk like always—it seemed a waste to stick to my sluggish habits on a day when I had such a spring in my step. I figured I'd head out somewhere to make the most of this day of strange energy.

There were a few consumables that I needed to top up. I could have just ordered everything online, but I didn't mind going out for a walk. It wasn't like I had anything better to do anyway.

I slipped on a jacket over my sweater, slid open my front door, and stepped outside.

The sky looked too clear to be considered winter, and the air was warm too. After a slight pause, I went back inside and took off the sweater that I'd been wearing under my jacket before going back out again.

Deserted shopping centers certainly held a lot of charm, but they had an atmosphere that somehow pushed people away. Maybe crowded, thriving stores looked more welcoming than empty ones. As a socially awkward guy with no real desire to get to know the staff, I felt a little uncomfortable in mom-and-pop stores. You know, the ones where the customer service was dependent on the owner's good nature.

The problem with people was that whenever they met someone new, they seemed to want to classify them somehow. They'd generally ask what you did for a living, and as someone unemployed, that might have been what put me off.

All of this meant that rather than supporting the local business, I was heading for a small shopping center that was within walking distance.

As I moved away from my residential area, which was near a mountain, I approached the more densely populated urban area.

The people here were productive individuals who worked honest jobs every weekday. I used to be just like them, so the idea of living a respectable life wasn't alien to me—I simply had no desire to go back.

That said, seeing all these working people in their suits made me feel out of place, like I was the only one not pulling my weight. Now that I was here, I couldn't wait to be home. Perhaps the whole reason people pursued careers was to avoid this sort of feeling. Or perhaps not.

Once I'd finished shopping at the grocery and general stores, I decided to head straight home.

The shopping mall also leased out space to a few other small stores, such as a clothing store and a furniture store that sold stylish desks and chairs. None of them caught my interest. I had more than enough clothes and furniture, and I had no real desire to upgrade to anything better. I passed them by and left the shopping mall, by which point I was unusually exhausted. It was probably the result of seeing so many people hard at work.

There was a time when I'd worked at least five days a week, sometimes staying overnight at the college for several days when I'd risked falling behind. There was no sickness preventing me from working. If I hated feeling like I was letting myself decay, I could just get a job somewhere, or maybe even start a business based on my own ideas. I had the free cash. It was something I thought about occasionally, but it never led to any action.

I knew why: it was because I had no motivation. I felt no urge to be useful to strangers, nor did I want to use my earnings on material possessions like fancy cars. I'd also stopped caring about appealing to the opposite sex. Having savings meant that there was also no incentive to earn money to pay for food—in other words, I didn't need to work to stay alive. Perhaps I'd grow tired of feeling this way someday, and that would create enough of a push to spur me into action.

Alternatively, there was the possibility that I would put an end to it all once I figured out an easy way to do it. But it felt like a waste to die while I still had my savings, and the idea of dying after my money had been used up was a horrible thought. Choosing death while carefree enough to make that choice was one thing, but I suspected it was something else entirely to die while feeling I'd been backed into a corner.

With these negative thoughts running through my mind, I was about to cross a bridge spanning a river near my home when I saw something happening that I couldn't make sense of.

There was a girl—a child of early elementary school age with a mysterious sort of air about her. What baffled me was where she was walking. She wasn't on the sidewalk or the road—she was walking on the bridge's guardrail.

It was highly unlikely that she was deep enough in debt that she might be killed over it, so I couldn't understand why she was reenacting the steel beam

crossing from a certain gambling manga. There were no sadistic millionaires around to enjoy the spectacle of some poor soul desperately trying to get rich. The girl couldn't have given up on life, so I was at a loss to explain why she was doing such a thing.

It was then, with perfect timing, that the rail she was standing on shook.

Maybe an overloaded truck had just passed by. Whatever the cause, I couldn't look around to investigate. My eyes were fixed on the girl as she lost her balance and looked as though she would plummet into the river.

The bridge shook vertically, her body seemed to float, and then she took three small steps along the railing in an apparent panic. By that point, her body was tilted toward the river while her feet were still planted in place. It was clear to anyone watching that there was no recovering from that pose. She raised up her other leg in the direction of the bridge in an attempt to shift her center of mass toward the other side of the railing as much as she could. It looked like a desperate bid to beg the laws of physics to show mercy on her. Then, after striking a pose with her limbs outstretched and body tilted, the girl disappeared from my view.

I ran to the railing and looked down into the river, which had swelled due to the time of year. There, I saw the girl being swept downstream, and it looked as though she couldn't swim.

I could save her, but I might die. I hesitated for a moment, but then quickly made my decision. *Well, that wouldn't be such a great loss. It's not like I've got anything in particular I want to do before I die, and no one would miss me anyway. What would it matter?*

I took off my jacket to strip down to my shirt, then jumped over the railing. After a three-meter or so drop, I plunged into the river. When my body hit the water's surface, I was struck with an incredible coldness, as though my blood vessels were all constricting at once. The shock made me feel like my whole body was a rag being wrung dry, but I endured it and started swimming.

It had been about four years since I'd last gone swimming, since neither the beach nor the swimming pool were part of my daily life. I swam and swam, the flow still carrying me, until I finally reached her.

Once I'd caught up to the exhausted girl, I grabbed onto her clothes and headed for the shore while I struggled to keep my head above water. I could feel my body's warmth rapidly draining away, and my strength was fading. It was then that I realized I hadn't eaten that day because I'd planned to grab a bite while I was out.

After just barely reaching the river's edge alive and somehow getting the girl ashore, I didn't have enough strength left to drag myself out of the water. The river swallowed me up and carried me away.

Chapter 1 — Birth

I

I felt that I was in a dream, floating through a placid, lukewarm sea. It was an abnormally long dream, but I never grew tired of it. It was as if I lacked the ability to feel tired of anything, and my mind remained dull and blurry. In this world, my body and the environment were at comfortable temperatures, and I felt only bliss. There I remained in what felt like an endless slumber.

The tranquility persisted for about a week, or perhaps even a year, when I suddenly felt an intense pressure—like a pro-wrestler had put me in a headlock. My peace was brought to an abrupt end by a crushing sensation that gripped my head and squeezed my brain itself.

My first thought was that someone was trying to crack my skull and kill me, and I was filled with a sense of mortal peril. The panic soon gave way to a feeling of liberation, however, as though I'd woken from a nightmare. I was released from the unexplained compression and found myself in an open space. The sensation of floating disappeared, and then I was immersed in more warm fluid while arms and fingers cradled me. Once the clear water had cleansed my body, I was wrapped in a soft blanket and held by an unknown person.

I saw the world around me as no more than an indistinct blur, regardless of whether things were close by or some distance away. It was as if I'd been stricken with a serious case of both near and farsightedness. Something was wrong with my brain, similar to times when I'd gotten very drunk on good wine. Trying to satisfy my needs for food and sleep while trying to avoid sources of pain were as much as my feeble mind could handle.

I would instinctively suckle at the breast of some stranger as my vision filled with light and then faded to the dark of night repeatedly. After I'd been through that cycle ten or so times, my thoughts finally began to grow clear.

Am I still dreaming? This was the question I kept turning over in my hazy

mind.

I'd felt like I was in a dream the entire time, but several days had gone by since the mysterious head pain. It didn't make sense for me to have such long-term memories within a dream.

"Mm aah ii a deem?" I tried to put the thought into words, but my throat wouldn't work well enough for me to speak.

Why did it all feel so real? Was I in heaven or hell? Or was this some sort of afterlife?

The last thing I remembered clearly was how I'd struggled in the cold water before drowning. My body had been chilled to its core, and I'd soon lost the ability to move. With that, I'd swallowed water and sunk into the river. In other words, I should have been dead. Yet I wasn't in any pain, and I wasn't cold.

But it was possible that I really had died. There was the possibility that past-life memories were something everyone had at first, something erased and forgotten the moment they started a new life, similar to the way that even remarkable dreams somehow faded from memory upon waking. The experiences that made me into the person I was would soon fade away in that case, but I wouldn't have minded—it didn't feel like much of a loss.

At any rate, these strangers would place me in a soft bed where my sole task seemed to be sleeping each day away. It was as though I'd been reduced to an infantile state, unable to tell whether I was awake or dreaming.

The person who presented their breasts to me appeared to be my mother. She stayed by my side each day, attending to my various needs. Having someone change my diaper made me feel like I'd turned into an infirm old man.

Her breasts were small, but my mother was very beautiful. Still, she looked unlike any person I'd ever known. She had none of the sharp features that would have suggested European descent, but she didn't look Asian either. She had a calm and gentle face that I always wanted to look at. She was perfectly human for the most part, but her ears were clearly the wrong shape. They were somewhat pointed, and the tips were covered with the same hair that was on her head. Though her ears were pink around the earlobe, the hair covered the edges and tips. They certainly looked warm, but also unnatural.

The words she spoke were completely alien—I couldn't understand a word of it. I guess it should have gone without saying that someone who looked like her wouldn't speak Japanese. Whenever night fell, she'd swaddle me and wrap me up in her arms. She would hold me tightly and speak in a soft, yet clear voice. I suspected she told me fairy tales, but the words were as meaningless to me in that state as everything else she said.

Now and then, my father would take turns caring for me. If we were in a Japanese town, there was no doubt he would've caused the women to turn their heads as he walked down the road. When he held me in his arms, I felt hard muscle that suggested the slim body beneath his clothes was surprisingly well built. His lean figure could have easily belonged to a boxer or rhythmic gymnast.

What sort of job would make a man turn out like that? It was a total mystery.

Based on their living standards, I didn't think we were in modern times. Their clothes were all made of natural fibers, the uneven threads of the fabric suggesting they were all handmade. Once, my mother had taken me into the kitchen, and I'd noticed that they were still using a kiln. We had to be out in the sticks. The only noises at night were the calls of forest animals, and the house rarely had visitors.

The place felt too well built to be some rural shack, and there was often meat on the dinner table. That made me think they were well-off. As far as I could tell, my mother was a full-time housewife, and there were no signs of them struggling to get by. But the lack of any visitors meant they probably weren't merchants, so I could only assume they were wealthy farmers.

It remained a mystery, and I wouldn't be able to ask until I'd learned to speak. All I could do was snooze the days away in my crib while guessing at the meanings of the words they spoke.

A year flew by as I lounged in that absentminded state.



A year had passed without my consciousness fading like a forgotten dream. It seemed that I was going to continue living as a little boy.

Being forced to start a new life on “New Game Plus” despite already being bored of my old one sounded like it should’ve been like a huge hassle, but it turned out it wasn’t so bad. It was nothing like the life I’d grown tired of because everything here was so novel—the environment, the people, and the many discoveries that lay in wait.

My Japanese parents weren’t crooks or anything, but I definitely wouldn’t have called them good people either. In this world, however, my mother and father loved and doted on me. The confusion I’d felt toward everyone else’s completely different outlook on life was now replaced with a feeling of comprehension—I realized that those people had been raised by loving families.

It was around then that I began to practice walking on two legs. I had expected it to be easy, but my weak little knees would easily buckle, and so much of my weight was in my head that I couldn’t keep my balance even when I did manage to stand up. I found it easier to get around by crawling.

I learned that my family had a custom of celebrating birthdays. I hadn’t kept track of the seemingly countless days that passed, but a full cycle of the seasons had passed when they threw something like a birthday party. The three of us celebrated with a fairly extravagant meal. That said, I was given the same old gruel, complete with small chunks of meat, that always served as my baby food. Nevertheless, I was definitely the cause of festivity, which meant it had to be my birthday.

As time went on, my mother continued to stay at home with me, talking in a language I couldn’t understand. This allowed me to gradually learn the words she spoke. I quickly figured out which words meant “mommy” and “daddy” because she said those to me constantly. I started using new words as soon as I’d figured them out, without much worry for how it shocked them. They probably thought I was weird, but all I cared about was getting out of diapers as soon as possible.

This cozy, ordinary life went on for three years.



Time went by, and I reached the age of three.

Based on the information I’d gathered during my three years of life, my dad’s

name was Rook, and my mom's was Suzuya. Our surname, *i.e.* our family name, was simply Ho.

The name newly given to me was Yuri. Yuri Ho. It was simple and easy to remember.

The day after my third birthday, my dad—Rook—took me to his workplace in the forest. We traveled beyond the tall hills that lay behind our home on a plainrunner.

"Plainrunner" was the name given to a large type of flightless bird that looked like an ostrich in a winter coat. Their bodies were completely covered in fur—except for the legs—and they could, surprisingly, be ridden like horses.

I was absolutely certain that these birds didn't exist on Earth. If they did, there was no way I wouldn't have known about them—they'd have been the main draw in every zoo. I already thought it odd that there were people with hair-covered ears, but these strange birds only served as concrete confirmation that I was no longer on Earth.

Our plainrunner made a fine steed, and I found it even more comfortable than riding a horse. As I sat between Rook's legs, I didn't feel like I was being rattled around. The bird ran on two legs with joints that looked like backward knees, and the legs absorbed shocks like a car's suspension.

Rook's workplace turned out to be something like a ranch. He'd told me so already, but this was definite proof that Rook was more like a ranch owner than a farmer. The sprawling site included barns, fences that outlined what looked like horse-riding courses, and an open area that appeared to be a pasture. Overall, it didn't look much like a place where you'd keep livestock like cows or pigs—it seemed much more suited to raising racehorses.

"This is my ranch," Rook announced before hopping off the plainrunner. Then, he lifted me down from the position that had been between his legs.

I didn't try to hide how impressed I was. "It's incredible."

It was a peaceful place, situated within a picturesque clearing in a coniferous forest. The wooden barns were a little worn, but well cared for—there wasn't a single hole or rotten plank in sight. In fact, none of the buildings showed any

signs of decay despite their age. It was a fine ranch even by the standards I'd known in Japan.

"Do you know why I built my ranch out here?" Rook asked with a tinge of pride in his voice.

I already knew from our day-to-day conversations that my dad considered it important to let children think for themselves.

"Did you build everything from scratch, dad?"

I'd been convinced that successive generations of the Ho family must have managed our ranch, but the way he'd worded the question made it sound like Rook had started it himself. And this was no small ranch—it was spread across several hectares.

"That's right. I made it."

"Amazing."

That really is amazing, I thought. Someone his age made all this from nothing? That's no small feat.

"But enough about that. You didn't answer my question."

Oh, right.

Although he'd just chided me, it was clear from the look on Rook's face that he appreciated the compliment from his son.

It's seriously impressive. I can't believe it grew this big in just one generation.

I'd reached his age once myself, but I hadn't had a wife or any real estate besides the tiny place I'd inherited from my grandfather. Rook, on the other hand, had a wife, a child, a home, and an entire ranch that he'd built from scratch. That was amazing.

"Hmm. Is it so that the animals can be noisy without bothering anyone who lives nearby?" I asked.

"That's...an interesting idea. I suppose all the noise would annoy anyone living too close."

If I read between the lines, I understood that wasn't the answer he'd been

hoping for. Still, he was looking at me with admiration.

Seemed like a sensible answer to me. Maybe I'm still stuck in the city-slicker mindset?

"The thing is, most people living around here keep livestock in their own homes. They wouldn't care about ours," Rook continued.

Oh? That's news to me.

The idea of someone keeping livestock in their own home was...hard to imagine. I knew that my grandfather had once had a stable at home when he was young, but no one who'd lived near me back in Japan had owned a ranch, so I'd never heard of anyone keeping cows or horses at home. I'd seen nothing like it.

"What was the right answer?" I asked. "I can't figure it out."

"Look. This area's between mountains, isn't it?"

In the distance were things that looked more like large hills than mountains, but he was right that there was nothing but hillside surrounding us in every direction. Visibility here was terrible.

Oh, he's right. We're in a small basin.

"The wind passes over the top of the mountains, so the air down here is still," he explained. "You can't raise birds properly on windy land."

Okay, now I get it. It's hard to argue with that.

Rook still looked young, but he had to have been even younger back when he founded the ranch. He must have searched for a suitable patch of land, and when he'd found the right place, he'd kicked off his business right here—building upon ground that had once been nothing but forest. It sounded simple when I summed it up like that, but there was really nothing simple about it. My dad was quite possibly one of a kind. I wouldn't normally call someone who'd achieved all of that a farmer—I'd call him a young entrepreneur.

"Is running this ranch your job, dad?" I asked.

"More or less," Rook replied.

As I'd guessed from conversations back at home, he was managing the ranch himself.

"Do you handle everything by yourself?"

"No, I employ people. They should be here already."

That figures.

Rook led the plainrunner by its reins to a spot where he could tether it. Next, he took my hand and brought me over to a barn.

The barn's interior was laid out like stables, but it held plainrunners instead of horses. Even though the birds were in separate rooms with dividing walls, they weren't crammed in; each one had ample space. Smaller enclosures would have made it possible to keep more birds without the need to expand, so Rook may have been pampering them and prioritizing their well-being over profit.

There were also two people inside the barn wearing work clothes. They were standing in the central walkway on either side of something resembling a trailer. They were giving large amounts of feed to the plainrunners by transferring it from the fully loaded cart into feeding troughs.

"Oh, they eat hay?" I asked. I didn't know the first thing about plainrunner behavior.

"They'd be scrawny birds if they ate nothing but hay. There's grains, berries, and beans mixed in with it."

"Wow."

So they're herbivores, I thought. They eat pretty much the same stuff as horses.

"Wild plainrunners eat grass and forage for fallen berries, but they'll hunt small animals when there's no other food in the winter. Even here, they'll sometimes catch a rabbit while out grazing."

It turned out that they weren't herbivores. No one had ever heard of a horse eating a rabbit. Judging from their speed and tough beaks, plainrunners were probably adapted to hunt for mice and rabbits as they ran through forests and across grassland.

“Don’t you ever feed them meat?”

“No. Meat makes them strong, but they’ll turn violent once they get a taste for it.”

“I see.”

They develop a thirst for blood?

I gathered that it wasn’t an essential part of their diet. On the other hand, the understanding here wasn’t backed by solid science. If Japanese livestock researchers were to run their own analysis, they’d possibly find the feed sorely lacking in calcium and sodium. They might even make easy improvements by mixing meat and bone meal into the feed, or by putting chunks of rock salt in the barn. As Rook’s oldest son, I was probably in line to inherit it someday. Investigating that sort of problem was potentially the key to a happy future.

“That said, some people like an aggressive bird. When we get a special order, we let them hunt inside a special enclosure that keeps the mice trapped inside. Those ones are a handful to train.”

Similar to how some people like unruly horses.

“Why would anyone want a violent plainrunner?”

“Some soldiers prefer that sort of bird, despite the fact most of them can’t even ride it once they’ve bought it. But with proper handling, those birds can rampage across a battlefield like no other. They can kill several people with their kicks alone.”

They rage like bloodthirsty beasts? I could guess from what Rook just said that plainrunners could be used as a sort of weapon. *Maybe I’ll be able to ride them in the future, but I’m steering clear of the violent ones. I can easily imagine climbing onto the saddle only for it to throw me off and instantly stomp on my head.*

“But I mostly leave the plainrunners to others,” Rook went on. “I get involved in the final stages of training, but not much else. My main focus is caring for the kingeagles.”

“King...eagle?” The name had come up a few times in books that were read to

me, but I'd never understood what the creature was.

"It's a type of bird that can fly."

I guess he's breeding birds for falconry too?

"Follow me," Rook said.

I followed as he led me to another barn some distance away. Unlike the barn that housed the plainrunners, this building looked about three stories high. It had many windows, all of which were open, but there was a sort of iron lattice that ran across each window frame's interior. From a distance, I'd thought it was a building where the workers lived, but apparently there were more birds in there.

When it came to bird-raising facilities, the only birds I'd seen besides chickens were all in cages and mesh fences, so I didn't know what to expect. I could imagine that removing all the walls and ceilings from a three-story building would create a spacious enclosure, making the interior a sort of aviary for something large.

Once we'd reached the building, Rook removed a hefty bar that kept a large pair of doors closed. With that, he opened the double doors.

"Go on in."

I stepped inside as Rook gently pushed me forward.

What I saw surprised me so much that my knees almost gave way. Beyond the doors was a massive open space. As I'd suspected, the three-story building had no walls or floors.

There were several birds living inside, but these were no run-of-the-mill birds—they were extraordinarily big. I estimated that they were about three or four meters long from head to tail. Their striped brown wings were tucked up flat against their bodies, their talons were sharp, and their beaks were large. Their eyes looked as keen as any bird of prey. They were basically eagles...really massive ones.

Rook saw my jaw drop. "Surprised?" he asked with a grin.

"This is... Yeah."

“I thought you would be.”

“Yes, they’re...”

The birds known as kingeagles were both large and striking. They weren’t fat, doughy things; their silhouettes were sleek and slender.

The building housed five kingeagles. It felt odd that such a large structure held just five birds, but it was probably appropriate given their size.

Though I’d initially thought it was just a set of outer walls and a ceiling, there was also a large tree that had simply been stripped of its branches before being positioned here as a broad pillar. It supported the whole structure without creating a hindrance that would stop the birds from flying around. Thick beams extended from it and connected to the walls, creating perches that the kingeagles appeared fond of.

While I watched, a kingeagle would occasionally fly from one perch to another. It would leap into the air, then—with two or three great wingbeats—gain considerable speed before coming to a sudden stop by gripping a beam. If the beams had been much narrower, the impact might have broken them.

The kingeagle’s wings were covered in striped brown feathers. The region spanning across the chest and stomach varied from the rest because it was white with flecks of gray. Equally beautiful were their bright yellow beaks, which stood out against those muted colors.

“I can’t believe these things exist...”

It was like a glimpse into the marvels of nature, or as though I was witnessing a mythical giant bird—like the Middle Eastern roc or huri kamuy of Ainu origins—brought to life.

“Right?” Rook replied. “They’re my favorite birds. They’re really smart, and friendly too—once you’ve tamed them.”

“You can tame these things?”

“Well, yeah. Otherwise they’d be too dangerous to ride, wouldn’t they?”

Ride?

“You can ride them?” I asked.

“You’ve heard about sky knights in stories, haven’t you?” Rook sounded surprised. “What did you think they were?”

There were indeed such tales, but I’d always thought they were just high-ranking knights; I’d never understood what they did.

“You’ll have to learn to ride them too,” Rook said.

I was struggling to keep up with everything he was telling me.

“Is it possible to fly on one of these while riding it?”

“If you’re not too scared, yes, you can ride one with me. Riding a kingeagle at the age of three is a bit of a Ho family tradition. I had to do it back when I was your age.”

That’s not what I meant...

The way he said it made it sound as though he was planning to fly a kingeagle with me today. I got the sense that he was trying to coax me into it, thinking a little boy like me would be too scared.

“These creatures can fly with a person riding on them?”

“Of course. That’s the whole reason I rear them.” Rook sounded completely serious. My dad then offered his unique brand of reassurance: “Don’t worry. Your dad’s the world’s greatest kingeagle rider.”

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t scared. Whatever part of my brain controlled common sense sounded alarm bells at the very idea of flying on one of these birds. But Rook made it sound like our family had a proud history of doing just that. Besides, I believed him when he said they were tame, and I didn’t sense danger. In fact, I didn’t get the slightest sense that Rook was encouraging me to do something dangerous.

“All right. I think I’m ready.”

“Good. That’s my boy.”

Rook took the wooden whistle hanging from his neck and put it to his mouth. The sound caused one of the great birds to come down to us. It was hard to imagine that he could pick out a kingeagle just by using the sound of the whistle, but only one of them had reacted, so he must have beckoned that one

specifically.

While I stood there astounded, Rook picked up a saddle—different from the one on the plainrunner—that hung on the wall. First, he put a leather ring that connected to the reins over the bird’s beak, then he fitted the saddle to its back and tightened a leather strap around its abdomen. Rather than being flat against the bird, the saddle was a little raised up, more like one made for a camel than a horse. It was designed to be straddled just the same, but the area where the rider sat was somewhat elevated like a seat.

Rook took the reins that now extended from either side of the kingeagle and pulled on them to lead the bird away. The kingeagle obediently followed without any resistance. With the reins in hand, Rook led the bird outside through the double doors we’d used to enter.

After replacing the bar that held the doors closed, Rook led the trotting kingeagle over to some grass a short distance from the building. Then he gave the eagle two taps on the head. That made the bird fold up its legs and drop into a crouching position. It complied as easily as an obedient dog being told to sit. He must have trained it well.

“Lift up your arms a moment,” Rook said to me.

I put both arms up in the air. He fastened a belt attached to several metal rings around my waist and tightened it so much that it hurt. Then, he grabbed my waist to lift me up.

“Here you go.” Rook placed me on the saddle like he was putting something on a shelf.

“Whoa.”

Once Rook had put on a similar belt, he climbed onto the saddle too. It was easy for someone of my height to sit on the saddle with my legs at either side, but Rook had to sit with his legs bent. It looked a little cramped.

Unlike horses, this creature had wings that the rider couldn’t obstruct with their legs. One solution would be for them to sit with their ankles raised up alongside their hips, but that’d be bad for their pelvis. It explained why the saddle was a little elevated—to improve the rider’s sitting posture.

Rook connected the belt around his waist to the saddle using leather straps, anchoring his body in place. I gathered that the waist belt worked as a safety harness. With that done, he turned to where I was sitting between his legs. My body was held securely against the saddle once he'd finished using straps to secure my belt in the same way. Now, whatever orientation the kingeagle might take during flight, there was no chance of me falling off.

Rook took up the reins.



As the eagle was beating its wings and preparing to take flight, Rook gave me some advice that he must have forgotten to mention until now: "Whatever you do, never open your mouth while flying."

The g-force hit me like nothing I'd ever felt before as the eagle left the ground behind. It wasn't the constant acceleration of an aircraft, it was more like waves of acceleration that came on with each beat of its wings. After gaining some height, the kingeagle increased its speed with several powerful wingbeats, and then it was flying for real.

The view below changed at a dizzying pace. In no time at all, we crossed the hills and a small river. We charged through a dense pocket of air while almost grazing the tops of the conifers below. Then the angle of the bird's wings suddenly changed, sending us soaring directly upward, higher into the air.

We rushed up to the altitude of a high-rise building. Unobstructed by tall trees or the planet's curvature, the view opened up and the world was spread out before us. It was as though the clouds had absorbed all of the moisture from the sky. The air was clear as far as the eye could see, and even the distant scenery looked sharp. It was beautiful.

It wasn't like seeing the world from a tiny aircraft window, or from the lookout point of a mountain top. This was an ever-changing panorama, unobstructed in all directions. Everywhere I looked, my view was clear, and the world was breathtaking.

After we'd flown in circles for a short while, Rook manipulated the reins again, and the eagle began performing aerial maneuvers with graceful movements. It rolled over in midair, flipping the world upside down. With my

body weight no longer holding me against the saddle, I felt myself instead supported by the safety harness around my waist.

A moment later, my weight was no longer supported by the harness as we transitioned into a free fall. I lost sight of the sky and horizon. Soon, the ground filled my view. We were falling, and soon we'd crash into the ground. A primal fear filled my mind, sending me into a panic.

But the free fall lasted only a few seconds. The eagle's wings changed angle to once again catch the wind, gently shifting the bird into a horizontal path of flight. We were still a good height above the ground by the time we'd fully leveled off.

We must have been flying for around twenty minutes when familiar-looking buildings came into view below us—it was the ranch we'd set out from. I'd completely lost track of where we were, but Rook must have known precisely.

The eagle descended so quickly that I thought we might crash. Just before landing, it beat its wings several times to apply the emergency brake, and then it finally touched down gently upon the ground.

"Phew," Rook sighed from his position above my head. He began removing his safety harness.

There was the sound of fittings clattering. Rook had himself free in under a minute, and then he immediately started removing my harness too.

Rook got off the kingeagle first and said, "Your dad's here to catch you, so just jump down."

I hesitated for a moment, but then I leaped down from the saddle. True to his word, Rook caught me and put me on the ground.

"How was that?" Rook asked, his eyes filled with anticipation.

"Awesome," I replied, telling him my honest feelings. "It was an incredible experience. I really mean it."

"Glad to hear it," Rook said, sounding relieved. "Looks like you'll be all right."

"What do you mean?"

"With eagles. Some people just can't get used to riding a kingeagle no matter

what they do. They need both feet firmly on the ground.”

Ah. When children turn three... That’s when they’re tested to see how they’ll handle it. Someone with a fear of heights would have no chance.

“I think I can handle flying. I don’t know whether I’ll be a skilled rider though.”

“Don’t worry, I can see you’ve got potential,” Rook reassured me. “And if I say so, you know it’s true.”

“Really?”

When a family member said something like that, I was filled with a sense of happiness and embarrassment that felt wrong for someone my age. During my life in Japan, my parents hadn’t been the sort of people who’d given their son that type of praise. I hadn’t even known the whereabouts of one of my parents. As for the other, we’d eventually broken contact and never spoke again. Now it felt like my mental age had been dragged down to match my body. Rook’s praise moved me, and I had to react quickly to hold back the rising tears.

“Does everyone start training at this young age?”

“You didn’t like it?”

“That’s not what I meant at all. It’s just hard to imagine everyone doing this.”

“Well, the three-years-old thing is just our family tradition, but everyone has to start when they’re small. You’ll never be a sky knight unless you learn to ride solo before you’re fully grown.”

Is he saying that you can’t ride a kingeagle unless you train as a child? That’s a sad thought. These kingeagles must be valuable creatures. They eat meat, so they must cost even more than horses. If you have to start training as a child, only people from the wealthiest families will ever get a chance to ride one.

“Why’s that? Why can’t someone decide to learn after growing up?” I asked.

Kind of like how you can fly light aircraft as a hobby.

“Because a kingeagle can’t fly with two adults on its back. It’s too much weight.”

Seriously? That sounds like a harsh weight restriction.

“Then what about fat people?”

“Ha ha,” Rook laughed. “There are no fat sky knights.”

You can't ride them if you get fat? Then I'm guessing Rook's slim, muscular build is ideal.

“There are those who grow up and then want to ride a kingeagle, just like you say—merchants, for example, who get rich through some lucky business deal. And, um...let's just say it doesn't go so well.”

He must be choosing his words carefully so he doesn't scare me. I bet they crash and die.

“You mustn't ever ride one alone until you've got permission,” Rook warned. His expression had gone from the face of someone talking about their favorite topic to the face of an adult worried for their child.

“I understand. I won't forget it.”

We were finished for the day, so we rode back home on a plainrunner. I spent the whole journey with thoughts of only one thing: kingeagles.

II

Time continued to pass, and when my fourth birthday was near, I made a request to my parents at the dinner table.

“Can I have an empty book for my birthday this year? Preferably one with a lot of pages.”

It was the first time I'd asked my parents for anything. They both looked surprised for a moment, but then Rook frowned.

“Yuri, what would you do with something like that?” he asked.

“It's for a diary... I want to write down my thoughts.”

“Oh,” Rook exclaimed as he turned to Suzuya. “He can write already, can he?”

“Of course,” she replied. “In fact, I've nothing left to teach him.”

Suzuya was my language teacher, but there really wasn't much more I could

learn from her. That wasn't to say that I'd gained a flawless command of the language, however—my mom's knowledge was simply limited.

Suzuya had grown up on a farm, and Rook was a descendant of nobility. Her family's farm wasn't particularly prosperous, and her family name wasn't even well-known locally. She was from a run-of-the-mill agricultural background, and she'd been raised like any other peasant.

Peasants in this country didn't go to school, and religious institutions didn't offer them any education either. At the very least, no education system of any sort existed in the area where Suzuya had grown up. She'd probably learned to read and write after marrying Rook—an unusual marriage in these parts, motivated by love—while they enjoyed life as newlyweds. She could write her own name and had no trouble reading signposts by the side of the road or the circular notices we occasionally received, but she was no scholar. Rook was technically a noble, so our home held a few books on law and some simple history books, but Suzuya couldn't read them because they used difficult words.

At any rate, I wanted a blank book so I could write down the knowledge from my life in Japan before my memories faded and were lost forever.

“Please. If you'll buy it for me, I won't ask for any birthday presents next year or the year after,” I begged while bowing my head low.

“The thing is, books are a lot more expensive than you seem to think,” Rook replied. I sensed his tone slipping into his trademark *lecture-from-dad* mode.

“You're right...” At times like this, my only option was to play the humble yes-man.

“It's not that I mind buying it, it's just that we're not talking about a toy here. If you're just going to scribble in it, it won't be worth the money.”

Rook was absolutely right about that. The paper here was nothing like the printer paper or traditional washi found in Japan. All that existed was parchment made by removing the fur from an animal's hide. Animal hides could be sold as furs just as they were, and making them into parchment required the extra trouble of stripping the hair, scraping the surface to create a thin sheet, and then cutting it into squares.

Needless to say, a stack of sheets that took so much labor to produce would fetch a high price once bound together in a book. I didn't know how much they cost precisely, but I estimated that a book would be made from about ten hides, so I wouldn't have been surprised if the value was somewhere between four to five hundred thousand Japanese yen. Obviously, blank books were less expensive since no one had spent time writing any text inside, but they would still cost a pretty penny.

I wasn't asking for something as cheap as a new gaming console. I doubt many parents would have bought such a costly item at the request of a four-year-old who probably wouldn't use it anyway. I'd told them I'd use it as a diary, but most parents would figure the child would use it for their doodles and tell them to just draw on wood instead.

But I wanted one despite all that.

Fortunately, mom had my back. "Darling, let's buy it for him. Yuri is always doing chores around the house. I've never known him to want anything so badly."

That's right. You tell him.

"I know," Rook said, "but a book would cost us four or five thousand ruga."

"Oh... It's that much?" Suzuya looked surprised.

Maybe *surprised* was putting it too lightly—*astonished* or *aghast* might have better described her expression.

Up until this point, I'd lived out in the sticks and I'd never actually been shopping, so I didn't know how much four thousand ruga was. I wondered how many loaves of bread we could buy with that amount.

"Yes," Rook continued. "Just think of the mountain of toys we could buy with a few thousand ruga. Why spend it all on a book?"

"I've thought hard about it and decided I don't want toys," I told him.

Toys are the last thing I need. They'll all be wooden blocks or something.

"Please," I persisted. "I'll do whatever chores you give me. And I promise I won't waste it."

“Are you sure?” Rook asked.

Oh?!

“Absolutely sure.” I tried to look as serious as I possibly could, though I doubt my little face made much of an impact.

“All right...” Rook agreed. “You can start by working hard to help your mom. I’ll ask you to help on the ranch soon too. Promise you’ll do those things, and I’ll buy it.”

“Really? I promise.” I agreed without a second thought. I’d run out of new words to learn, so I was bored at home anyway.

“You really promise?” Dad didn’t look convinced. “This is a man’s promise.”

“Darling, you worry too much.” Mom came to my aid once more. “Yuri is the type of boy who keeps his promises.”

Judging by the tone of her voice, she had full confidence in me. That was actually a little worrying in itself—if anything, I was a lowlife.

“H-He is?” Rook replied.

“You’ll be buying the book in the capital, won’t you? Why not take Yuri there with you next time?” Suzuya suggested.

“To Sibiak?” he asked.

“It’s the first time Yuri has ever asked for anything, so he must really want it. If that’s the case, I think it’s best for him to pick it out himself. I’d hate to see him disappointed if you come home with the wrong thing.”

Nice backup. Mom’s absolutely right. Otherwise he might pick up the equivalent of a coloring book when what I want is a blank journal.

“That’s a good point. It’ll be a good chance to show Yuri the city too... I’ll be delivering a kingeagle next week. How about we go then?”

Seriously?

I’d just heard them use the word “Sibiak,” which, if memory served, was the name of our country’s royal capital.

I get to go to the capital? That’s more than I hoped for.

“I’d be delighted. Please take me with you. And thank you.” I broke out into a smile before I could stop myself.

When my parents saw the grin on their son’s face, they both smiled warmly back.



A week later, I was riding a kingeagle with my dad toward the capital. It was further than I’d ever flown before. We crossed mountains, rivers, and several smaller communities until we came across something bigger—much bigger. It was undoubtedly a capital city.

Without having to be asked, Rook made the kingeagle fly in a circle around the city of Sibiak so I could take it in.

The place where I now lived was known as the Shiyalta Kingdom, and Sibiak was its royal capital.

I’d been imagining a large fortified city built on a plain or hilltop, but what I saw here was completely different. It was far from being fortified—in fact, there were no walls around the city at all. It simply extended across a flat region of land.

Sibiak was a city built along the banks of a great river, which had an island in the center. The river island formed a solid foundation, and the prominent towers of the castle built upon it appeared to soar to great heights even when viewed from the sky. It had to be the Sibiak Castle that I’d heard about in stories. And given that this was a kingdom, one would assume that a monarch lived inside. There was nothing primitive about the castle’s appearance—the whole thing was white, as if it had been decorated with delicate cosmetic stonework. The design wasn’t so much imposing as it was graceful.

Although the city had been allowed to spread out unimpeded, its sections—neatly divided by highways that formed precise, straight lines—suggested that this was a planned city. As someone who’d always been fascinated by medieval towns, I fell in love with this beautiful capital at first sight.

After we made a full circle around Sibiak, the kingeagle aimed its wings toward the island where the castle stood.

Once we were closer, I saw that the island was defended by a fairly high stone wall that ran along its circumference. I didn't spot a place where a boat could dock, which meant that the bridge on to the island was its only entry point. The island itself was basically a fortress. Perhaps the city had been built with the notion that it needed no defensive walls as long as it was possible to hole up in the castle during a crisis.

I saw park-like areas lined with many trees dotted around here and there, and there was something resembling a military base near the island's edge. The inner regions of the city included low buildings that looked like residences. As you'd expect from the center of any royal capital, the buildings were packed closely together.

Rook took the kingeagle down to the southern side of the castle, by the area that looked like a military base. Though the other open spaces were mostly parks covered by greenery, this one had simply been leveled and left bare, similar to a schoolyard. It was likely used for training exercises. Around it were crude buildings with unadorned black stone walls—further evidence that this was a military facility.

The kingeagle aimed for the empty space and descended with both precision and speed. Although I'd been allowed to take the reins myself several times in the past, I couldn't imagine trying to land a kingeagle with pinpoint accuracy in such a small space like this. If, for example, the tips of the bird's wings were to clip the walls or buildings on the way down, it would have lost its balance, gone into a tailspin, and quite possibly killed us both.

But Rook had overcome these difficulties without showing the slightest bit of concern. Once the kingeagle touched gently down, he released his belt and hoisted me off the bird. Since the moment we'd landed, someone had been approaching us from a shed where plainrunners were tethered.

"Hey, Rook."

"Oh, it's you, Galla," Rook responded casually to the man I'd never seen before.

His name was evidently Galla. While I wouldn't have exactly called him handsome, he didn't look shabby either. He had an intimidating figure with

short hair, and he was more muscular than Rook. I judged him to be a soldier of sorts. The populace must have slept easy with men like this in their armed forces. If everything was paid for by their taxes, he looked to be worth every penny.

“I’ve got a delivery here,” Rook told him. “Did you hear about it?”

“I heard. They said you were bringing a special bird for the princess.”

“It was a real headache, to be honest.” Rook frowned a little and awkwardly scratched his head. “They told me it had to be a young, high-quality kingeagle that a child could manage.”

People make that sort of order too?

“Bwa ha ha ha!” Galla erupted in laughter. “That’s what they asked for?”

There must be a good-natured man behind that mean face of his.

“Anyway,” Rook continued. “I brought our most well-behaved bird. Hope you get some good use out of it.”

“Oh, we will. Though I won’t be riding it.”

This man looked too big to ride an eagle in the first place. He was so tall and muscular that he might have weighed over eighty kilograms by himself, to say nothing of how heavy he must have been with a full suit of armor and a spear. If someone like him got on an eagle, it wouldn’t be able to fly, or at the very least, it would quickly get tired. Huge, muscular men made good soldiers, but a problem with kingeagles was that they weren’t good at carrying them.

“I’m sure the sky knights who serve the princess are well aware, but you’d be better off practicing with an old bird that’s mellowed out a little,” Rook explained.

Oh, really?

None of our kingeagles were very old, so I’d never had the chance to ride one like Rook had described. Our oldest was a female we kept for breeding, and the rest were sold off while they were still fairly young.

“Yes, the knights around her know that,” Galla replied. “I’m sure it’s Her Majesty the Queen who doesn’t. I bet she wanted her daughter to ride a

kingeagle of the highest repute, rather than one born in the royal guard's birdcages."

It turned out that Rook's eagles were held in high regard. I hadn't realized it until now because Rook had never bragged about it.

"Spare me the flattery. A bird won't fly well unless it's handled well, no matter how it was reared."

"Blame Her Majesty's motherly love. Still, I can't say it was a bad idea if you're the one who raised it."

Rook let out a long sigh. "Her Majesty will have my head if it throws the princess. I've trained it as carefully as I could."

"You needn't worry so much. If the princess can't ride it, I'm sure there'll be a sky knight happy to have it."

"I suppose so."

"Now, are you gonna introduce the kid?" Galla looked at me. His great height meant that he was actually towering over me, which was a little intimidating.

"He's my son. His name's Yuri," Rook said.

Galla crouched to get down to my eye level. Even so, his face was still above mine, and I had to look up a little to meet his eyes.

"Hello there, Yuri."

"Hello," I said with a bow.

Galla grinned at me. "A proper hello. Aren't you a good boy?"

"Thank you. It's a pleasure to meet a friend of my father's."

"You're a smart kid. Gonna be a scholar when you grow up?"

"I'm planning to inherit my father's business right now, though it's not certain yet. It remains to be seen whether I'll be fit for the job or not."

Galla looked at me dumbfounded, then gave me a couple of pats on the head with one hand. He stood up again. "He's awfully well-spoken for a kid. How old is he?"

“He’ll be four very soon.”

“Four? I haven’t seen a kid this smart since the princess.”

He must have thought I was weird, but I couldn’t bear pretending to act my apparent age all the time. I could do it for a few days, but several years was too much to ask.

“Don’t exaggerate,” Rook said. “He’s just a regular kid.”

Yeah, you tell him.

“My own son’s four,” Galla replied.

“Oh, is he?”

“Yeah. I said so in my letters.”

“Oh... I think I remember reading that.”

Get it together, dad.

“You think...?” Galla paused for a moment. “Anyway, let’s just say I wish mine were turning out half as well as yours.”

“Oh, come off it. I bet he’s no different from mine.”

“You’d never hear this polite talk from my brat, believe me.”

And here’s what happens when dads get to talking about their kids. Gonna be here a while... Or so I thought.

“Sir Galla.” A young woman appeared from behind a building and hurried over to us.

“Something wrong?” Galla asked her.

“Her Highness Carol honors us with her presence,” she said.

“Her Highness?” Galla echoed.

Her Highness was one of the titles given to royal family members. I guessed from the discussion that the “Highness” headed here was none other than the princess we’d just been talking about—the new owner of the eagle we’d ridden here.

“It’s not great timing... Let me guess—she couldn’t wait to see her eagle?”

“That’s correct,” the young woman replied.

Galla studied me and Rook in turn, like someone appraising a couple of antiques. His gaze was aimed below our faces, so he was making sure we were suitably dressed. As it turned out, we were both wearing fairly nice outfits for our trip to the city.

“All right, bring her here,” he decided.

“Yes, sir.” The woman saluted him before turning around and hurrying off.

No, don’t bring her here. I really don’t wanna meet her.

I looked at Rook, and from his pained expression I could tell he felt the same way.

“Nice seeing you, Galla.” Rook gave him a casual wave and then turned to leave.

“You didn’t get a signature, did you?” Galla noted with a mischievous smile. “Don’t need one to take with you?”

Hand over the goods, collect a signature—the basics of trade. Until he got that signature, the eagle delivery wasn’t finished.

Galla seemed to want Rook to meet the princess. I doubted he meant any harm, so I didn’t foresee any trouble, but I had zero familiarity with royalty. My lack of knowledge made me nervous.

“I’d rather not talk to royalty. My days of dealing with them are over.” Rook looked as though he considered it more of a hassle than something to fear. Presumably, there were a lot of awkward formalities to follow around important people.

“Don’t be like that. They could be regular customers in the future.”

“Uh...”

Before Rook could finish thinking it over, the same woman appeared from behind the building again. That came as a surprise.

The woman was accompanied by a sophisticated-looking girl, and she, in turn, was followed by two more women who looked like maids. The young girl was

about the same age as me, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin. Her silky hair fluttered in the breeze as she strode toward us. Rather than a dress, she was wearing an exquisitely tailored riding habit, complete with bottoms that appeared to be made of hide. Her choice of outfit spoke of her eagerness to ride the eagle.

Upon hearing the sound of boots scraping against the sandy ground right beside me, I turned to see Rook down on one knee. He was bowing to her in an odd fashion. Galla, on the other hand, simply gave her a standing bow, perhaps because he was better acquainted with her. Since I was Rook's son, I figured I'd better follow his kneeling bow. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to do it properly—I hadn't been taught any of the country's rules of etiquette. I settled for a monkey-see-monkey-do approach and imitated Rook best I could.

I heard the girl's clear, high-pitched voice above my head. "You may raise your heads."



I didn't know the first thing about proper manners. Was she being literal, telling me to simply lift my head up, or did she mean that I could stop kneeling entirely? Rook stood up while I was trying to figure it out, so I did likewise.

"I am Carol Flue Shaltl, and I believe you are Rook Ho."

"Indeed. I am honored to make your acquaintance," Rook greeted her respectfully.

The girl turned to look at me, but I merely lowered my head and took a step back to half hide myself behind Rook. Moving back probably made me look like Rook's apprentice, but I really didn't want to become the subject of conversation. Not only would it be a pain, but I felt like it would leave a bad impression if the customer learned that Rook had used the same eagle he was meant to deliver to transport his child to the capital for a little shopping trip. Maybe I was overthinking it, but little things like that could lead to someone complaining.

"I hear you showed great skill with a spear at the Knight Academy Combat Tournament. You must have been an excellent knight," the girl noted.

I'd never heard of that event before.

"You think too highly of me," Rook replied. "It was Galla here who bested me."

Knight...Academy...Combat Tournament? I guess a lot happened between him and Galla in the past. At any rate, this girl sure knows a lot. We were born around the same time, so she can't have spent much more time here than I have. Then again, she's a princess—she's probably got a rigorous education. Royals need it since they have to show proper manners in public.

"I also hear you raise fine eagles. Is this one mine? Does it have a name?" she asked.

"It hasn't been named. I'd be much obliged if you were to choose the name yourself."

"In that case, I must speak with my mother. Will I be able to ride it today?"

"The bird has flown a great distance from Ho Province to get here, so I believe

it would be best if it were to rest its wings today.”

“I see...” The girl’s shoulders slumped in disappointment.

Her clothes made it obvious that she’d thought she could run over and hop straight onto the eagle. She’d probably been waiting nearby, bursting with excitement, and now she was crushed to learn she couldn’t ride it after all.

Galla opened his big mouth. “Your Highness, perhaps you could take this opportunity to ask the proper way to ride an eagle.”

I could see enough of Rook’s face from behind him to tell he was scowling at Galla. His expression seemed to say, *couldn’t you just leave me out of it since she can’t even ride the damn bird?*

“Oh. Yes, indeed. How should I ride it?” the girl asked Rook.

“Well... I think it’s best to ride in a way that avoids arguments with the eagle. Please try to get along with the bird while you ride it.” Rook’s advice was painfully vague.

“I see. Then I suppose I shouldn’t smack it?”

Smack it...?

“I would advise approaching it like a friend. I’m sure the bird will respond in kind.”

“Very well,” the girl said while reaching for the eagle’s reins that Rook was holding. “I shall do just that.”

Looks like she can’t wait to take it away with her right now. She’s like a kid who’s just gotten a new hamster and wants to carry it home themselves.

“Will it be kept in the usual birdcages?” she asked Galla.

“Yes, Your Highness! That’s our intention,” Galla answered, then shot a glance at the woman who’d brought the girl to us.

“I can guide you there,” the woman said.

“Very well,” the girl agreed. “Please do.”

“Please take good care of it,” Rook said as he finally released his grip on the reins.

Rook was probably thinking, *I guess it's safe to let her hold the reins with this many people watching her.* The poor little girl stood no chance if the eagle were to try to escape, but a bird trained by Rook would never take off without permission. Still, he'd kept his grip on the reins long enough to think it over first.

"Thank you, sir. I shall treasure it." The girl gave Rook a few polite parting words in an apparent show of respect, then left us with her entourage in tow.

"So that's Princess Carol. Seems like a good kid," Rook said, clearly relieved that the encounter was over. From time to time he stroked his chin.

"Yeah, she is," Galla agreed. "The royal family's got an heir to be proud of."

I can't deny that she was a levelheaded kid. And I don't think there's anything stopping women from becoming the monarch in this country, so maybe we're in for a peaceful future once she's the queen.

Maybe she wouldn't be remembered as *Carol the Great*, but I couldn't imagine her ever becoming *Carol the Fool*. I didn't know how old she was, but I guessed she was about four or five. It was impressive that a girl of her age could inspire such confidence in adults.

"Hmm... Might have been nice to have a girl," Rook mused.

I couldn't ignore that. *I get how you feel, but...you didn't have to say it in front of your son.*

"Dad, how do you know Galla?" I asked Rook as we made our way out of the royal castle.

"He was in my year at school. Now he's doing well for himself in the first order of the royal guard."

I'd guessed as much from the fact that he was keeping an eye on the capital, but this confirmed that he was part of the royal guard. They were a unit that literally protected the royal family and their immediate surroundings. This unit had a first order, and presumably a second order too—no doubt the first order was the stronger of the two.

"What kind of school?" I asked.

"Knight Academy. It's here in the capital. You'll go there someday too."

Will I? First I've heard of this. I thought that I was going to carry on doing manual labor until I became manager of the ranch someday. I have to go to school too? I don't wanna. Just homeschool me or something. Anyway, why's it called the Knight Academy? "Knight" obviously refers to soldiers, so it sounds like a military establishment. Please tell me I've completely misunderstood somehow.

"Did you graduate from there, dad?"

"No..." Rook looked a little bitter, as if he were recalling unpleasant memories.

Did he have a hard time there?

"I didn't graduate. I quit halfway."

"Oh, I see..."

Rook was apparently a dropout.

When I thought back on it, I realized that Rook had never talked about his school days, or his youth in general for that matter. He occasionally recounted what had happened after he'd met Suzuya, and everything that came after their marriage, but he almost never told me about his youth.

I realized now that this was odd—most adults loved to recount their young days. Rook was attractive, athletic, and personable. I couldn't imagine him having a miserable school life or being bullied. And if the talk we'd just had with Galla was anything to go by, he had friends who were just as outgoing. If he'd dropped out despite all that, something bad must have happened—something he'd rather forget.

"If my dad couldn't do it, then maybe I won't be any good at this school either," I said in an attempt to distract Rook from unpleasant memories.

"No, you'll be just fine, Yuri," Rook replied while patting my head with his open palm.

I guess it doesn't take much to make an adult want to pat a kid's head.



We left the island—known as Royal Castle Island—and entered a castle town

on the opposite side of a road that ran parallel to the river.

The construction of the castle itself had been impressive, and the town was no different. There were rows of buildings made from stone and brick, and tightly packed cobblestone formed the pathway beneath our feet. The city hustled and bustled with activity; it was quite the sight to behold.

Rook seemed at home in the city as he weaved through the roads and heavy foot traffic without a single wrong turn. After I'd followed him for ten minutes or so, we arrived at a bookstore.

The store was made of stone, just like the other buildings around it, but a sign that depicted a quill and inkwell upon an open book hung from its eave.

"They probably sell them here... Let's take a look." Rook opened the door to the store and stepped inside.

I entered behind him and found that I'd been wrong about it being a bookstore—it was actually something that resembled a stationery store. The wooden, handmade shelves were packed with various types of quills, parchment, brushes, and several colors of ink. At the rear there were folded easels and canvases that had been mounted onto frames. I could also see sticks of chalk and blackboards of various sizes. It made sense now—stationery stores were more likely to contain notebooks than bookstores. A bookstore was no place to buy a blank book.

"Shopkeep, we're looking for an empty book with nothing written on the pages," Rook said to an old woman who looked ready to fall asleep.

"Ah, yes, we do have those," she replied. "They're rather valuable, so we don't put them out on display."

I see. Now that she mentioned it, I realized that the more valuable items were placed closer to the shopkeeper. This old woman didn't look like she'd be able to put up much of a fight against an armed robber, but it might have deterred shoplifting at least.

"Oh? Could we see them?" Rook asked.

The old woman bent down, opened some sort of box at her feet, produced a bundle from it, and placed it on the counter. "Here they are."

The bundle was wrapped in what appeared to be a thin oilcloth, which when stripped away, revealed several beautiful books. She took each of them in turn and arranged them on the counter. These were the kind of items that would normally be kept in a locked glass case where the customers could still see them, but that didn't seem to be an option in this era.

"Go on, pick one." Rook lifted me up and let me stand on a nearby stepping stool so that I could see what was on the counter.

There were four books placed alongside each other. The smallest wasn't an option because it really was pocket-sized. The next biggest was about B6 size—roughly as big as a manga volume—which was still too small.

Next was the fanciest of the bunch. It had a leather-coated cover with rivets, and its corners were reinforced with a metal that might have been brass.

The fourth book was about the same size, except it didn't have such fancy binding. The cover was similarly coated in leather, but its wooden interior wasn't as thick, and there were no rivets or anything. The leather on the cover included a strap that could be used to lock the book and prevent anyone from reading it.

"Could I take a look inside them?"

"Of course," the shopkeeper said. "Go right ahead."

Now that I had permission, I opened the covers.

Both had blank pages inside, making them essentially the same, but the fancy book had rather thick pieces of parchment for its pages. Each individual page was about as thick as a curtain cloth, which presumably reduced the total number of pages. The lower page count was beneficial if it were meant to be used as an ornamental piece on a shelf, but it was a major drawback for me.

Fortunately, the pages of the fourth book looked much thinner and therefore more numerous. When I opened the cover, the piece of wood backing looked to be of reasonable quality, and the hide had been expertly applied. I didn't know much about bookbinding, but this one looked well-made.

"I'd like this one," I said, pointing at the fourth book.

“Are you sure? It’s your choice, so why not go with this one?” Rook pointed toward the finest-looking book.

“I want this one.”

“You don’t need to hold back. Usually you end up better off in the long run when you pay more. It’s like they say: ‘You get what you pay for.’”

I doubt it.

“I don’t think that one has as many pages since the parchment’s so thick. Maybe it’s fine if you’re planning to do a lot of erasing and rewriting, but I’d rather have one I can fit a lot of writing into. That’s why I want the one with more pages. Besides, I don’t see any problems with the way this book is made,” I explained.

Finally, he accepted my decision. “O-Oh. Well, that’s fine then... Shopkeep, how much for this?”

“That will be two thousand eight hundred ruga.”

I didn’t know how much two thousand eight hundred ruga was worth, but it must have been a lot.

“I knew this wouldn’t be cheap,” Rook grumbled, sounding like he was having second thoughts. Clearly, it was a lot of money.

“Are you buying it for the boy there?” the shopkeeper asked.

“Uh, yeah. He said he wants it for a notebook or diary or something.”

“Oh, I see. What a wonderful idea. Though we all hold our memories dear, we’re also certain to forget them.”

“Are we?” Rook didn’t look convinced.

Likewise, I hadn’t kept a diary during my life in Japan, so I didn’t see the need. I shared dad’s skepticism.

“Yes, indeed. Once you reach my age, you’ll find yourself regretting the loss of all kinds of memories—the things your father said to you as a child, or the recipe for the soup your mother used to make. Yes, I think this purchase will be good for you too. Isn’t it sad to think that someday, when you die, your own son

will forget all about you and the things you told him?”

That got a grunt of agreement out of Rook.

Grandma's got a point there. Yeah, it really is a sad thought. Your own child forgetting all about you... I wouldn't want anyone to spend their whole life mourning me when I'm gone, but if I'd raised them, I'd at least hope that they'd remember my face whenever they visited my grave. Not that I've ever raised a child.

“You know, I think you’re right,” Rook agreed, nodding to himself as if it had made quite the impression—her words seemed to have struck a chord with him. “All right, we’re buying it. Can you give me change?”

Rook took out three gold coins and placed them on the counter. They must have contained impurities because the color was a little dull, but they still glimmered like gold. I didn’t doubt that they were the real deal.

If he needs change, then I guess each gold coin is a thousand ruga, making this three thousand in total. I can't believe a single book costs several gold coins...

“Yes, I can. Does this look right?” She placed five silver coins down on the table.

“That’s three hundred ruga too much.”

Now I know that silver coins are worth one hundred ruga.

“Well, the boy has a discerning eye, so I’ve decided to reduce it to just two thousand five hundred ruga. I’d regret taking the full eight hundred... Hee hee hee hee,” the old woman cackled.

Sounds like she'd be right at home stirring a cauldron.

“In that case we’ll buy some ink while we’re here. Give me three hundred ruga’s worth.”

“Very well. Here it is.” She placed a rather large inkwell before us.

Three hundred must be worth quite a bit. Makes sense since it's three pieces of silver.

Rook wrapped up both items in cloth with deft hand movements and then put

the remaining two silver pieces in his coin purse.

“That’ll be all,” he said.

“Please come again.”

With that, we left the store.

We didn’t need to buy a quill because our ranch was literally littered with them. I now had myself a full set of stationery.

Nice work.

We visited a cutler, tailor, and a few other places before Rook led us to the edge of the capital.

How are we gonna get home now that we don’t have a kingeagle? I puzzled over the question as Rook brought us to some sort of station at the city’s outskirts. He had no trouble getting us a plainrunner there.

“Did those people really just let us borrow their bird?” I asked.

If we were just borrowing a bird for the sake of a quick day trip somewhere, giving it back wouldn’t have been a problem, but our plan was to head back out into the sticks. Presumably, we’d have to abandon the bird somewhere. This would have to be a very generous country to allow everyone to travel around like that.

“Those were the state-owned stables,” Rook explained. “They only give those birds to people on official state business. In our case, we were delivering to the royal family.”

I remembered now that we’d talked to someone about something or other on our way out of the castle. I’d thought it was a pass needed to leave the castle grounds, but apparently not. They’d actually issued us a sort of warrant that granted us permission to use a stagecoach-like system.

“Really? That’s lucky for us,” I replied.

“Yeah. Normally we’d have to ride a public stagecoach, find a merchant troop, rent a horse for a high price, or walk.”

Those were the options I would have expected. Poor people probably had to

walk. I might have actually enjoyed that—this was my first outing, and everything was of great interest—but I'd probably be more comfortable on a plainrunner.

“Oh. So that's how normal people travel around?”

“Mostly. That said, very few people walk the whole distance because it's just too far.”

Rook placed his hands under my armpits and lifted me up to put me on the saddle of the crouching plainrunner.

“Here's your precious book and mom's souvenir,” he said while tying the cloth holding our luggage around my body. “Don't drop them now.”

He spun around, leaped onto the plainrunner in one agile movement, then gave the reins a tug.

After we'd traveled for about three hours—stopping to take a break every hour—we reached a large town named Jamna. This was where we got a fresh plainrunner from the stables. Plainrunners were fast, but they tired out easily and took a long time to recover. Pushing them too hard clearly wasn't an option.

From there, we continued on without entering the town, and after another two hours or so, we entered a small village before sunset. Rook tethered the plainrunner in a stable in front of an inn. He gave it some water that had been drawn from a nearby well, then strolled into the inn like he owned the place. After he'd summoned the owner with a bellowing shout, we arranged to stay the night and left the owner with our luggage.

“We'll take care of your belongings, sir. Would you like your breakfast served at dawn?”

“Yes, that'll do fine. Now where can we get dinner?” Rook asked.

“If you turn right after stepping outside, you'll find a tavern.”

In a small dwelling like this, food and alcohol were bound to be served in the same place. As for the inn, it was little more than a fairly large house with some space for guests. Still, it beat sleeping in a pile of hay on the ground.

“Let’s go take a look.” Rook took my hand and led us outside.

As it turned out, the tavern was right under our noses as soon as we exited and looked right. The sign outside was a picture of some beer.

We found no other patrons inside the tavern. The evening sun was beginning to set, but the sky wasn’t yet dark. Perhaps it was a little early for the daily rush in a village like this. The local drinkers would no doubt begin to gather once it got a little darker.

The proprietor appeared as soon as we entered, and he fetched us a children’s high chair the moment he saw me. The service wasn’t half bad. Travelers like Rook with children in tow might have frequently visited here from the inn.

“That’s thoughtful, thanks,” Rook told him.

The burly proprietor gave him a warm grin. “Ya welcome, sir.”

I bowed my head to thank him too.

“Jus’ give a shout when ya’s ready to order.” He then returned to the kitchen where he was probably still making preparations.

“What’ll you have, Yuri?” Rook asked.

“Hmm. Stew would be nice.”

“Stew? Got it. Now what should I have...”

Stew was great. Unsurprisingly, most food in this world wasn’t on par with what I’d known in Japan, but stewed dishes were the exception—they were roughly the same. Stewing softened the meat and vegetables and drew out their juices; all it took after that was a few herbs to suppress any unpleasant odor from the meat.

Rook called out the proprietor and ordered for us. “I’ll have a beer with a rabbit and cheese pie. For the boy, a sliced baguette with milk stew. Powdered cheese too, if you’ve got it. And also a cup of goat’s milk.”

“As ya wish, sir.”

The proprietor went back to the counter and soon returned to us with the

goat's milk and beer. About thirty minutes later, the tavern began to grow busy. As expected, many of the patrons looked to be hunters or farmers based on their clothing. A young female employee appeared and started taking orders.

Rook and I chatted while we waited for the food.

"The plainrunner we just borrowed wasn't very good, was it?" I asked.

"I wouldn't call it bad, but it was nothing special. If it were one of ours, we'd train it a little better."

"Oh. Are our birds especially well-trained?"

"You could say that. But that one was about average."

The plainrunners we'd ridden on that day certainly moved up and down more violently than the ones back home, and it'd left my butt feeling chafed and sore. As I drank my milk and discussed it with Rook, I learned that it was down to the birds being poorly trained.

Before long, the female server brought out our food and placed the plates on our table. Now that we had food, we continued to talk while eating.

I sprinkled powdered cheese over the thick milk stew, let my baguette soak in it, and then bit into the softened bread. It was delicious. There was tender rabbit meat in the stew, which had been cooked so that it practically melted in my mouth. It had definitely been worth the wait. This food was a little different from Suzuya's cooking—the flavors were rich and salty, to suit the tastes of an adult man with a fondness for beer.

"Those vertical movements are the real problem," Rook explained. "Think about it—if everything from the legs up is bouncing up and down, the bird's going to waste energy. It's as if it's constantly running up and down steps, isn't it?"

"So it doesn't just make us less comfortable?"

"It's definitely uncomfortable, but it's also extra strain on the bird. One of ours could have run twice as far."

Apparently fuel consumption varied greatly depending on training. That was no surprise since the way it had run had been so different. The plainrunners

raised by Rook were so smooth that it was like riding in an electric car. I never had to worry about my butt feeling chafed and sore.

“You know, a kingeagle must be really fast,” I remarked. “We got to the capital so quickly.”

The journey to the royal capital had taken about an hour. On the trip back, however, we’d ridden for six hours—on a creature faster than a horse, mind you—and still we weren’t home. An eagle was in a whole different league both in terms of speed and convenience.

“They are. They’re quick and fly straight. The roads we took today sent us on a detour.”

“That’s right. We were to the south of Jamna while flying, weren’t we?”

Rook looked a little taken aback. “I’m surprised you noticed.”

“The hills on the other side of Jamna had these distinct cone shapes. I figured that they were the same ones we saw off in the distance while flying.”

“You had your wits about you. I’m proud of you,” Rook praised me. “We could just about see Jamna on the journey out too.”

Could we?

“I didn’t notice that.” I decided to share a thought I’d had for a long time: “You know, eagles would sure get a lot more use if two people could ride one.”

If they could carry two people, then they could be used like taxis. Important people could get around conveniently. It’d be the ideal vehicle—like a helicopter or light aircraft that could land just about anywhere. In fact, if two people could ride one, adults could learn to fly them. That way the practice would be more widespread.

But Rook made a sour face. “Maybe, but there’s no use talking about it. Others have had the same idea before, and they’ve tried to improve them in the past. I’ve even made attempts of my own to breed a stronger line of kingeagles, but two people is just too many.”

“Even if one of them is a thin woman?” I asked, recalling a similar scene from a book.

“You’re smart, Yuri, and you know better than to do anything stupid, so I don’t mind telling you this—a good kingeagle can fly with two men on its back.”

Huh? So they can fly with two people?

“Then why don’t—” I blurted out, only to be silenced when Rook raised his hand.

“If you saw it for yourself, you’d understand. They can fly, but they barely manage to get themselves off the ground. If they flap their wings furiously like robins, they can keep themselves in the air, but the bird panics because it’s on the verge of falling. It makes steering incredibly hard. It would only manage to fly from our house to the ranch, but even that distance is far too dangerous. Even if it was me behind the reins—mind you, I’ve never tried it, so this is just a guess—I’d probably crash nine times out of ten.”

“I see...”

It must look like an overloaded vehicle trudging along while the driver slams his foot on the gas—like trying to drive a four-ton truck with an eight-ton load.

It wasn’t as bad if an overloaded car broke down, since it was on the ground, but a kingeagle fall could very well be fatal because of the height. If someone with Rook’s ability would crash ninety percent of the time, that made it impossible to practice with two passengers. The risk was just too great because both the bird and the qualified rider—someone who was in short supply—could die.

“But still, couldn’t two people fly if one’s a woman?” I’d read a scene like that in one of the heroic tales in Rook’s library back home.

“If she’s thin, then maybe you could consider it. Though it’s hard to say because it depends on the weight of the rider too.”

“You’ve never tried it, dad?”

“Never,” he answered without hesitation. “If I was in a tough spot with no other options, well, I’d demand that the woman strip naked first, and I’d strip naked myself too.”

It didn’t sound like a joke.

“Sounds like it’s best not to try,” I surmised.

“You’ve got that right. And don’t you forget it, Yuri. Thinking about weight is the absolute fundamental.”

“I’ll make sure I remember,” I said.

Rook sighed, seemingly relieved that I agreed with him. The alcohol might have been going to his head.

“You’ll find out for yourself when you go to school, but a lot of girls believe in those stories. And once in a while—very rarely—a student will do something stupid. I know you’re no fool, Yuri, but never ever agree to let someone ride with you.”

This was a shift in the conversation. It was rare to hear Rook mention school.

“Why would anyone do that?”

“Since there are so few kingeagle riders, there tends to be a lot of stupid ideas and myths. One of the most common tropes in stories is the scene where a sky knight rescues a woman by carrying her on his kingeagle. It’s the dumbest thing.”

That confirmed what I’d already guessed. Those scenes were standard in romantic stories with knights and princesses.

“Are you saying that a stupid trainee sometimes gives in to a request from a girl and lets her ride with him?”

“That’s right. It’s usually a mistake made by some kid who gets overly excited after first getting permission to fly alone.”

“I see...”

“To be honest, the eagle tends to get spooked and crash-lands into some trees before ever getting high enough to kill anyone, but that doesn’t mean they don’t get seriously hurt. Imagine how much an idiot you’d have to be to lose a limb that way.”

“Well, I’ll make sure I never do it. Though I’ll never have the chance anyway.”

“Yuri, the girls are going to be all over you. Even I had trouble fending them

off.”

What’s this now? He sounds like he’s about to start bragging about his son and his luck with women at the same time. Spare me.

I figured I’d better change the subject. “Speaking of girls, we saw that girl with blonde hair today. Was she the queen’s daughter?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah. Her Majesty Queen Shimoné’s daughter... Though it sounds weird to call her that. Her Highness the Princess.”

“Is she going to be the next queen?”

“That’s not decided. I think she has a younger sister. Though I suppose the older girl is turning out so well that it’s a safe bet she’ll be queen.”

A younger sister? Unless the younger sister is some kind of prodigy, the older one’s bound to become queen.

“Don’t tell me you’ve got a crush on her, Yuri?” Rook asked with a smirk.

“What?” That remark must have gotten to me more than I’d expected, because my voice sounded awfully ill-tempered.

“O-Okay, I’m glad it’s not a crush. It would be a huge pain if you became a royal.”

“A family like the one you’ve made would be ideal for me. I’d rather not turn my life upside down,” I said.

“O-Okay.”

“Why don’t you tell me about how you and mom first met? It’ll give me an example to follow.”

I could only get him to talk about his past while drunk. I was dying to know how he met a woman like Suzuya.

“Uh, let me think...”

We ate until our stomachs were full, and Rook drank a good amount of beer before we went back to the inn. Rook slept deeply.

He’d drunk so much the night before that I thought he’d stagger out of bed, but he seemed just fine when we set out early the next morning.

We were greeted by Suzuya's smile when we finally made it home around noon. This really was a great family.

III

I rode birds with Rook, worked as a ranch hand, learned to knit with Suzuya, and wrote in my book whenever I had spare time. Life went on that way for three years, and I eventually turned seven.

Around two months after my seventh birthday, conversations at home became increasingly somber.

I'd been living in an environment where very little information could reach me, but I'd been able to find out a few things during my seven years of life.

In this world's language, the word "til" was used to refer to humans of all different types.

People like Rook and Suzuya—and me, for that matter—belonged to a race known as the Shanti. This essentially meant "people of Shan." If the word "Shanti" existed when there was already another word for "human," it implied that this world was home to another race besides the Shanti.

Indeed, the word "Kulati" existed to distinguish between them and the Shanti. Again, it meant "people of Kula."

I'd initially thought that the term "Shanti" referred to citizens of the Shiyalta Kingdom—in other words, that Shanti and Kulati were like nationalities like Japanese and Chinese—but that wasn't the case. The two races were fundamentally different on a biological level.

For example, the country which neighbored the Shiyalta Kingdom, known as the Kilhina Kingdom, was also populated by Shanti. They weren't Shiyaltans, but they were still Shanti. Much like how a Japanese person would still be considered Japanese in addition to their nationality, the people of Kilhina were considered Shanti in terms of race and Kilhinan in terms of nationality.

Members of the Shanti race were incredibly long-lived compared to humans, generally living well beyond the age of eighty if not afflicted by injuries or illness. It was only once they'd reached the age of one hundred that they would

be considered elderly. What's more, Shanti faces were—in my opinion, at least—beautiful...even if they didn't think so themselves.

Resistance to cold must have been characteristic to the Shanti, because they primarily inhabited the northern region of a large continent. Long ago, this northern region had all been united as one state known as the Shantila Empire, but it had collapsed following the loss of a war nine hundred or so years ago.

The Shanti's defeat was brought about by members of the other race—an alliance of Kulati. After being driven from their capital by the alliance, the empire became fragmented, and the surviving imperial children each became independent monarchs.

The political system of the Shanti was unique in that the ruling monarchs were female ever since the old days of the Shantila Empire. In short, the Shantila Empire was ruled by a successive generation of empresses, and when the empire broke apart, the nations that formed were ruled by queens.

I'd pieced together the sequence of events by combining everything I'd learned while skimming through history books. A once-great nation that had united many people had collapsed, spawning smaller states in its wake here and there. But, of course, these new states were weak, and they had been defeated in one war after the other over the course of nine hundred years. The only remaining nations were the Kilhina Kingdom and the Shiyalta Kingdom that I inhabited.

Geographically, this was a great peninsula jutting out from the mainland, with the Shiyalta Kingdom at the peninsula's edge, and the Kilhina Kingdom closer to its base—like a shield protecting our country.

As war moved across the land, drawing ever closer, the Kilhina Kingdom inevitably found itself at the front line. The Shiyalta Kingdom, meanwhile, had never been damaged directly by the war, and was comparatively peaceful.

But the people of the Shiyalta Kingdom weren't complete idiots; they knew that their country was next in line once the Kilhina Kingdom collapsed. Naturally, refusing to aid the threatened kingdom would be complete folly—both nations would then be picked off one at a time. That was why military support was offered to the Kilhina Kingdom each time they came under attack

from the Kulati.

And when military support was dispatched, it was always the Ho family that provided it. Yes, the same Ho family that Rook originated from—in other words, it was the name of my family's head household.

Ho was a warrior-class family of knights, and since their soldiers were the strongest, it was denoted as a chieftain family. Chieftain families were powerful, similar to what you'd call a "daimyo" family in Japanese history. The person who was in charge of the head household, and thus head of our family, was Rook's own older brother. This meant that Rook had the status of someone next in line as daimyo.

But despite this lofty position, he'd abandoned the path of knighthood at some point in his life and chosen to go his own way instead. This choice meant that the trueborn son of a daimyo—albeit not his heir—had become a merchant rather than a warrior. In the eyes of society, Rook was an unusual case who'd made bizarre life choices. Luckily, his brother was an understanding sort, and somehow everything had worked out. A fortunate consequence was that Rook currently had no obligation to go to war.

In this country, when the head of a chieftain family would lead an expedition, knight families serving under them were naturally expected to take up arms and join the forces. Unfortunately, the forces led by the Hos of the present age had been greatly diminished. They had been forced to dispatch military aid before they could replace their casualties time and time again. This caused their army to gradually weaken.

And so it happened that Rook himself was asked to go to war. The conversation had likely taken place several days prior, when a messenger had come to us and I'd been sent to my room. No doubt it was also the cause of the gloomy atmosphere that currently hung over my home.

Rook appeared to avoid contact with the head household as much as possible. Though it wouldn't dampen his mood, his face betrayed his displeasure whenever he heard from Suzuya that a messenger from the household had visited in his absence.

At any rate, Rook had responded with a firm refusal. He was a man whose

passion was caring for living creatures and riding birds. The violence of the outside world was alien to him. This was the very reason that he hadn't become a knight and currently lived in the mountains with his family of three. His life choices weren't so unlike those of a hermit who'd turned his back on society. Then again, if Rook had lived like a freeloading no-lifer, there was no doubt he would have been dragged home by the scruff of his neck by now. But he'd worked to build his ranch, and a long list of important and wealthy clients—like the royal family—sought the birds it produced. Rook had made an impressive living for himself, so not even his own family could force him to join the expedition. He was spared.

When word came, I breathed a sigh of relief for my father. But this hard-won refusal didn't change the fact that his brother was leading the expedition. If Rook valued his reputation, he would at least have to attend the send-off expedition ceremony—a banquet held the day before his brother was to depart.



When the day came, I headed for the banquet wearing newly tailored clothes. We rode on plainrunners. Suzuya sat behind me, but I held the reins.

I had been riding birds almost every day, and had received a lot of training from Rook. Although I hadn't learned the more complicated plainrunner gaits, I had at least gotten the hang of basic traveling despite my small size. But even so, this was my first time riding a plainrunner without Rook's supervision. On top of that, I'd only handled an adult bird rather than a chick just a few days ago. This was only my second time riding one.

As Suzuya held me from behind and acted as my backrest, she also held the reins of two other plainrunners that we were bringing with us. Rook planned to arrive after us because he had no choice but to deliver a kingeagle.

We made slow progress as Suzuya directed me to the city. The plainrunners she pulled along would flee if she were to ever let go of their reins, so it was the time to show my skills. If the plainrunner I controlled misunderstood one of my instructions and accelerated too quickly, the reins Suzuya held would be pulled from her grasp. I was secretly nervous as I steered.

We traveled for almost an hour before something like a castle gate came into view. This was Kalakumo—the town where the Ho family manor was situated.

Kalakumo was officially the capital of the Ho Province, but it wasn't a grand city like Sibiak. The entrance to the city consisted of a very basic gateway made from stone. It had been left open in anticipation of the expedition, and the area was busy with all sorts of carts and people.

As we passed through the city gates, bystanders glanced at us suspiciously—no doubt the sight of a mother and child mounted on a bird was a strange one—but they moved out of our path regardless, likely because we had plainrunners. Warriors, knights more specifically, used the birds as their means of transport. Even the idiots among them knew better than to block the advance of plainrunners just before an expedition.

Suzuya and I slowly progressed through the parting crowd with our three birds. Buildings lined the road, but this city was nothing like the lively highways of the royal capital. These weren't the extravagant, three-story-high buildings of Sibiak.

I knew that I'd actually been here once before while I was still an infant, but I didn't actually remember it. Nothing had made sense to me back then, and I hadn't even understood the language. It was strange to think that the second son of a prestigious chieftain family hadn't taken his eldest to the head household in seven years, save for one time shortly after my birth. Rook must have really wanted to avoid coming here.

The manor was surrounded by a wall and a moat. The only way to enter was a gate and bridge that formed the entrance.

When we drew near the entrance, one of the soldiers who was stationed as a sentry asked us to identify ourselves.

"Who goes there?" he demanded. His tone was aggressive, probably because tomorrow was the expedition.

"Yuri, son of Rook Ho. My mother and I are here to see off the expedition."

In any case, it felt unwise to ride the plainrunner inside the walls, so I had the bird crouch, and Suzuya wordlessly dismounted. I then jumped down from the

bird too.

“Suzuya, wife of Rook. Were you not given word...?”

“Rook Ho? Who...?” The guards looked confused, as if the name Rook was unfamiliar.

Fortunately, a woman emerged from within and beckoned us inside. “This way, Lady Suzuya.”

I couldn’t remember any other time that I’d heard someone call my mother “Lady.”

The manor was a huge two-story building. It was like a rectangle with wings that jutted out from either side, creating a square bracket shape overall, and in its center was a garden. Besides the manor, there were about four other structures that looked like granaries, sheds, and an enclosure for kingeagles that was smaller than the one we had on the ranch.

Suzuya walked on ahead and then stopped at a reception area.

Before the receptionist who was tasked with seeing to the guests could do her job, a man further up ahead came toward us and called out, “Good to see you, Lady Suzuya.”

Suzuya turned around in surprise and then nervously lowered her head when she saw the owner of the voice. “Lord Gok. My apologies for not writing.”

It felt like something important was happening, so I lowered my head too.

The man named Gok was Rook’s older brother. He was the head of the household, which made him leader of the Ho family and all of its vassals.

“Raise your head. There’s no need for formalities. We’re siblings, aren’t we?”

The word “siblings” confused me, but only briefly—he obviously meant in-laws.

I raised my head when I sensed Suzuya raise hers. This allowed me to take another look at Gok. His build was small compared to Galla, who I’d seen a few years prior, but he was nonetheless a brawny man and bigger than Rook. He was clearly hairy because a thick, red beard covered everything from his chin to his ears. It somehow suited him and gave him the look of an adept warrior.

“Oh... You’re here alone? What happened to Rook?” he asked, a hint of anger on his face.

“He’s prepared a kingeagle as an offering. He plans to ride it here,” Suzuya replied.

Rook would be arriving on the kingeagle he was giving to the head household, which meant he was offering three plainrunners and one kingeagle in total. Still, he was probably trying to stall his arrival until the last possible minute. Though if he was late, things would get awkward.

“Ah. So he just put the reins in his wife’s hand and sent her on her way, did he?”

It seemed I was right about that hint of anger. Gok wasn’t concerned about Rook being late, he was annoyed because he hadn’t escorted his wife.

“It was actually my son who brought me here,” Suzuya said while pushing me out from my hiding place behind her back.

Please, no. Leave me out of it.

I briefly tried to resist being pushed forward, but Suzuya only pushed harder to make her insistence clear. I showed some futile resistance, only to be forced out from behind her.

This sure does happen a lot...

“Good day, Lord Gok. I’m Rook’s son,” I said as I respectfully bowed my head.

“This boy handled the reins?” Gok looked a little surprised.

“Yes. He was able to transport us safely thanks to the training my husband gave him.”

“Ah... Yuri, was it?”

Ah jeez. Now he’s remembering my name. Well, I guess that’s to be expected—I’m his nephew, after all.

“Yes, his name is Yuri,” Suzuya said.

“Are you good with plainrunners?” Gok asked me.

“Yes, very good,” Suzuya replied in my place.

“Oh. What about kingeagles?”

“He’s quite good with those too.”

“Got any other talents?”

“He’s also good at reading, writing, and togi. I’m proud to be his mother.”

“Good at togi as well?”

Oh, come on. Why’s mom have to tell him all that? I thought childishly.



Togi was the name of a board game that was played in this country. The most similar game back on Earth was Chinese chess. I'd played shogi before, but I had initially been taken aback by togi's unique system. There was a gap in the center between one's own side and the enemy's side of the board, creating two separate halves with limited pathways for attack in between.

Rook was particularly fond of the game, and whenever I'd begged him to read me books for the sake of learning words, he'd force me to play togi with him afterward. But liking something and being good at it were two different things—sadly, Rook lacked any talent for togi. Within a month or so, I was better at it than he was. Rook had reacted with mixed emotions, including sulking for a while. That wasn't the first time something like that had happened. Shortly after marrying Suzuya, he'd taught her the rules, and she had also gotten better at it than him. Although Suzuya wasn't especially fond of that sort of game, she was good at predicting the opponent's next move. It had taken three years until I could consistently defeat her.

Gok's expression changed the moment he heard that I was good at togi—he looked like an excited young boy.

"We've got some time before the banquet starts. How about a game?"

Is this guy for real? I glanced over at Suzuya. Sure enough, she didn't appear too fond of the idea either.

"I would hate for us to do anything that might cause you offense, Lord Gok..."

"What are you talking about? A nephew's basically the same thing as a son. He doesn't have to mind his manners around me."

Is he going to force me into this now? Come on, mom. Tell him no.

"Well, if you're quite sure. Yuri, go play a game with him."

Well she gave in quickly. Do I have to?

Mommy Suzuya had an annoying tendency to be a caring mother one moment, and a traitor who'd throw me to the wolves the next.

Knowing there was no use arguing now, I bowed my head in resignation. "Let's make it a good game..."

I left Suzuya behind and followed Gok. The two of us entered the manor while *Dona Dona*—the song about a calf being led to the slaughter—played in my head.

This is about as awkward as it gets.

Gok ordered his servants to prepare a togi set for us. Once we'd removed our shoes and entered the manor proper from the porch located on one side of the building, we found the set waiting for us.

There were two soft seats that resembled armchairs, a table, a board, and a full set of togi pieces. This set was much higher in quality than the one we had at home.

Conifers grew incredibly well in this country, but broad-leaved trees were considered precious because of the region's harsh coldness. Yet the latter was preferred in furniture making, rather than the soft lumber that generally came from conifers. That meant that anything made from the wood of a broad-leaved tree was more costly. Despite that, virtually everything in the Ho family manor seemed to be made from expensive hardwood. Even the board and pieces—ideally made from especially tough timber—had a black luster, hinting at the durability of the wood used to produce them.

Once we'd taken our seats, I examined Gok's face and realized that he really did resemble Rook. However, while Rook usually looked placid, this man appeared to favor a stern expression. At that moment he looked mostly relaxed, but some tension still remained in his face. It wasn't completely overbearing, but it felt a little intimidating up close. But even though his face didn't show it, I got the sense he was having fun. His expression wasn't so different from the one Rook often made while playing the game. I gathered that the two brothers shared a fondness for togi.

"This is a fine togi set," I remarked.

Better start with a compliment.

"Oh, you recognize a good set?"

"I just noticed that it's not made from ordinary wood..."

"That's true. There's nothing that quite compares to this."

“I see...”

I'd better not say too much—I don't really know what I'm talking about.

“All right, let's get started,” Gok said. “Truth is, it's a busy day for me.”

Well yeah, you're busy. You're like the supreme commander. How could you have time to waste on the night before the expedition heads out?

Gok began setting up his pieces, so I quickly did the same.

“I tend not to think very much,” I reassured him. “I don't think the game will last too long.”

“We won't bother with sand then. You can go first.”

By sand, he meant an hourglass. I'd never played with one since we didn't have one at home, but I knew they were used to measure how much time players could spend thinking between moves.

Whoever moved first generally had an advantage, but it wasn't major.

“I'm sure you're the stronger player, so I'll accept your offer,” I replied.

I set down a hard piece with a sharp clack as I made the first move.

A series of clatters followed, and before long a number of guests, along with a few people who looked like knights, had gathered to watch our game. The sight of their boss playing a board game with a little kid was surely a rare and entertaining spectacle.

But the show was over not long after it began. Our game ended after just thirty minutes or so. We'd both been making moves with little pause in between, so the match had gone on for over a hundred moves.

Unlike his little brother, Gok must have been fortunate enough to become proficient in his hobbies the more he practiced. He was a strong player. I thought I'd gained an advantage during the opening, but his midgame strategies proved so incredibly effective that he'd soon had me at a disadvantage. His strategies were so clever that only a genius could have conceived of them, leading me to suspect that he was actually using famous moves known to most players, but not me.

“I concede,” I said. “I see I still have much to learn.”

I’d lost. I’d been constantly faced with unfamiliar strategies which had left me wide open to attack throughout the game. I only knew the strategies Rook had taught me, so I’d been unable to cope despite my best efforts.

“How about we play one more round?” Gok suggested. “That ended sooner than I thought.”

To my own surprise, the suggestion pleased me. I enjoyed the game. Gok’s moves were fluid, novel, and fun to play against.

“Gladly,” I agreed. “Would you allow me the first move again?”

“Of course.”



“I concede,” I said with my palm flat on the board—the standard gesture of defeat. “I can’t win.”

It pained me to admit it, but there was no point continuing this game. Besides, I was probably upsetting his schedule.

After various twists and turns, the game had somehow lasted about an hour. Although he didn’t have an obvious way to put me in checkmate, my situation was beyond hopeless. Not only was Gok at an advantage overall, his king was in a safe position while mine continuously evaded enemy attacks. I’d also lost an important piece needed for an offensive play earlier. I’d kept my eye out for the strategies I’d learned from our previous game and even defended against them to some extent, but I still hadn’t been able to take the initiative. He’d outplayed me overall.

“I suppose not,” Gok said as he stroked his beard.

“Thank you, I learned a lot.” I bowed my head while still seated.

“Hm...” Gok looked thoughtful with his hand against his chin.

Perhaps he wanted to analyze the game. I would’ve been more than happy to, but I knew he was busy. Several people, presumably his servants, had been anxiously waiting for a chance to speak to him for some time now. I was no doubt keeping him from hearing some important announcement.

Gok looked at me without paying the least bit of attention to the servants. Then, he suddenly looked away and slipped his right hand into the inner pocket of his fancy jacket. As he rummaged around, I began to think he might pull his wallet out and give his nephew some pocket money.

Then, in an instant, Gok jolted into action.

“Ah!”

The hand in his pocket shot out like he was going to punch me. If it wasn't for my youthful eyes, I might not have seen the curved dagger he was holding. As his hand headed straight at me, I instinctively pulled my head back in an attempt to dodge. The point of the dagger came to a dead stop an inch away from my face.

My head was filled with question marks.

I assessed the situation. This man had just drawn a weapon and slashed at me with the unsheathed blade, only to stop a short distance from my face.

What's the big idea, mister? You wanna kill your cute nephew?

He'd stopped short of cutting me, so it wouldn't have injured my face even if I hadn't tried to get out of the way, but that hadn't made it any less frightening.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Did I do something wrong?”

Up until that point, I'd thought I was making a good impression on my uncle. This deranged behavior felt like a sudden betrayal.

What if I had him all wrong and he's actually short-tempered? Maybe I hit a nerve somehow. Should I get out of here right now?

“Hm... You've got guts. You'll make a fine knight.”

Apparently, he was satisfied with my reaction. Gok's desire to murder me—or to scare me at least—was gone. He sheathed the blade and returned it to his pocket.

What? Was that a test just now? They make everyone ride a kingeagle at the age of three, and now this. Is everyone in the Ho family out of their mind?

“Oh... Thank you...” I mumbled. I couldn't get my head around what had just

happened, and I didn't know how I was supposed to feel, but what else could I say?

"How about you marry my daughter and we'll adopt you?"

Marry his daughter...? If she's my uncle's daughter, doesn't that make her my cousin?

"I-I'm not sure how to respond."

"You're probably still a little too young," Gok said before rising from his chair. "Think about it. It's one path that's open to you if you'd like to realize your true potential."

What potential? I basically wasted my whole life when I lived in Japan.

"I can't agree to marry a woman without even seeing her face," I replied.

I've had bad experiences with women before. I'm not taking any chances.

"Then you can spend some time with my daughter during the ceremony. You're too young to drink, so you'd just be bored at the banquet with all the grown-ups anyway. I'll let Rook know."

Spend it with his daughter? Ugh... I don't like this idea.

But he was right that rather than feeling bored and out of place among a bunch of adults at the expedition ceremony, I might be better off spending time with this kid.

"Very well. I'll do so," I replied.

First I have to play with an adult, and now I have to babysit a child. Being a kid is hard work.

A hurried maid took me to a room. She knocked, introduced me briefly, and ushered me in before closing the door behind me. I found a lone child sitting at an unassuming desk, leaning against the backrest of her chair in silence. She didn't react—her eyes were closed. She had black hair, and she was so thin that she couldn't possibly have been trained in martial arts. This had to be Gok's daughter, though I hadn't gotten a chance to confirm because the maid had left quickly.

As for the room itself, it was rather large for a child's bedroom, but there weren't any toys or ornaments. On the desk, there was a piece of wood, an inkwell, and a lamp which consisted of a wick in a saucer of oil.

The lamp was currently illuminating the girl's face. She looked to be about the same age as me. Assuming that this was my cousin, I already knew her name and age from conversations with Rook. She was a year younger than me, and her name was Sham.

"Hey there," I called out to her.

She didn't respond.

What's her problem?

She didn't so much as bat an eyelash when I spoke to her. She simply remained leaning against that backrest with her eyes closed. But we'd knocked before entering, and the maid had briefly introduced me—she couldn't have slept through it all.

"Wakey, wakey," I tried again, but there was still no response.

Maybe she's hard of hearing? She's not dead, is she? Is this another test where they see how I deal with being accused of murdering a girl?

I began to worry that she might actually be dead, so I nervously approached and reached out to touch her face.

Her eyes sprang open; she was alive. "How rude."

"Are you deaf?" I asked her.

The girl glared at me in distrust. Her eyes seemed to say, *Who does he think he's talking to?*

"There's no problem with my hearing," she stated.

"Well, if you can hear then you should answer back."

The rule of replying when greeted applied in this country as much as any other. And here she was calling me rude when *she* was the one who really needed to learn some manners.

I sat myself down on a nearby chair without asking. I'd already made a bad

first impression, so I wasn't going to worry about politeness now. "Thinking about something, were you?"

"Yes."

It turned out that she hadn't simply ignored me—she was busy thinking something over. Her dad was heading out to war the next day, so perhaps her behavior was justifiable.

"Are you mad because I interrupted your thoughts?" I asked her.

"No. It doesn't matter because I can't concentrate today anyway."

"Oh, okay."

We could faintly hear a clamor of voices from outside the room. That was only natural given that a banquet was underway in the center of the manor. Still, it could've been concern for her father, not the noise, that was bothering her.

"What were you thinking about?" I asked.

"It's beyond your understanding," she replied bluntly.

She's thinking about something most people wouldn't understand?

"Maybe it is," I reasoned, "but you won't know for sure unless you tell me."

"Yes, that's true. But even so, I fear it would be a waste of effort."

What a rotten brat. She's no fun at all.



“It’s not like we’ve got anything else to talk about. If it’s giving you trouble, we should at least try to find out whether I’ll understand or not. You don’t have to tell me if it’s something personal, though.”

“There’s no point in trying. Please leave right now,” she demanded.

“I’m not leaving. Just humor me, would you?”

Sham sighed softly. *This uncultured ape came barging into my room and started talking to me in its ape language. How can I make it go away?* was probably what she was thinking.

This brat...

“If I tell you, will you leave?” she asked.

“Sure. I promise.”

She sighed once again. “All right then. I’m wondering whether there’s an unlimited number of primes.”

For a moment, I didn’t understand the word “primes.” But in the Shanish language that we spoke, it was a word formed by combining the words for “indivisible” and “number,” so I guessed at the meaning. *Prime numbers?*

“You mean like two, three, five, and so on?” I asked.

“Yes...”

“Like eleven, thirteen, seventeen, and so on?”

“I just told you, yes.”

Okay, she definitely does mean prime numbers. But what’s up with her? Isn’t she like, six? If she’s a year younger than me, that makes her six. I can tell she’s smart because she’s using well-formed sentences. Isn’t your average six-year-old playing with toy cars and saying, “Mommy I did a poopy” at this age? Come to think of it, the princess was also really sensible when I met her. Maybe this is just how girls from truly prestigious families are? Kind of like how private elementary schools set really hard exam questions.

“You wondered whether prime numbers are...?”

“Whether there’s an infinite amount of them,” she replied.

Something's wrong with her head...

"Why are you thinking about a thing like that?"

It was a complete mystery why a girl her age would even worry about it. *Shouldn't she be like, you know... There's gotta be other things. Not that I'd know.*

"So you truly don't understand," she sighed. "Please get out."

"I do understand."

There are unlimited prime numbers. The mathematical proof didn't come to mind right away, but I knew it was true.

"Well, let me hear your answer then," she urged. She was looking at me with disdain, probably thinking I was bluffing.

"Has no one come up with a proven answer yet?" I asked.

"There is a proof, but that's all I know."

Okay, so there is one. That's not surprising since a proof has existed on Earth since 300 BC. Another genius on the level of Euclid must have once lived in this world too. That's impressive. But if it's already been proven, then why's she thinking about it? Does she solve number theory problems for fun?

"As I thought, you can't answer," she replied.

"I can."

"Well then, let's hear it."

Now she's ticking me off. She must think I'm just here to waste her time. How did it go again? I've written it in my book back home.

"Let me think for a second."

"All right... Not that it'll do you any good."

I ignored her snide remark and gave the question some deep thought. I'd written it down over a year ago, but my youthful brain still remembered things quickly. After a little thinking, the proof came back to me.

"Let n be an integer of 2 or greater. Then n and $n+1$ cannot have any common

divisor other than 1.”

Conveniently, the n sound wasn’t similar to any Shanish words.

Sham looked at me with suspicion clear on her face.

“Do you get it? The difference between a variable n and $n+1$ is 1, so obviously they can’t have 2 or greater as a common divisor.”

“That makes sense.”

“So if we multiply n by $n+1$, the result must contain two or more prime factors. Unlike the prime factors of 4 and 8, those prime factors can’t all be the same. If we let the result be m , then the product of m and $m+1$ must contain three or more prime factors. If we continue this process infinitely, we’ll derive an infinite number of primes. Thus an infinite amount of prime numbers must exist.”

When I was done reciting the proof, Sham was left with her mouth agape. From time to time she’d mumble things like, “Ah, um...uh, but...”

She began writing on the piece of wood beside her, probably to check it for herself.

I was confident that she wouldn’t find any errors, although I’d be quickly looking for a hole to jump into, or maybe a very high place that I could throw myself off of, if it turned out I’d gotten it wrong.

After a short while, Sham finally looked at me with a completely different expression and muttered, “That’s amazing.”

Ready to admit defeat?

“Did you read it in a book back home?” she asked. Her face was completely different now. The brat was actually smiling.

“That’s right.”

“I’m impressed you remembered it. Thank you.”

“It’s not hard. Not for me, anyway.”

I’d probably have a much harder time memorizing a method that uses reductio ad absurdum.

“Could you perhaps let me borrow that book sometime?” she asked, her eyes sparkling.

I didn't get it from a book... I wrote it in my journal in Japanese. The writing system's so different that I'm probably the only one who can read it, and anyone who sees it will probably think I'm insane. Can't have that.

I quickly came up with a lie. “Sorry. I didn't find the book at home. It was at the royal capital.”

“The capital? I see...”

Well, if she goes looking for a book like that at the capital, she'll probably find one. Though whether it'll be the same solution as mine is another matter.

“I didn't catch your name...”

“Yuri.”

“My name is Sham. Did you travel here from the capital?”

“No, I live close by.”

“Close by? Are we relatives?”

“Yeah, we're cousins.”

“Cousins? Um... Are you Rook's son?”

I was surprised to learn that she knew Rook's name. “That's right.”

“I see. I knew you weren't one of the knights' boys.”

I guess I'm not a knight's son. Rook's situation is complicated, but he definitely isn't a knight.

“I envy you.”

She envies me? She's got a more comfortable life than I have.

“My family rarely buys me any books because no one understands me,” she explained.

I'm guessing she thinks I learned these things by reading books like crazy. I guess that's not a surprise. As far as I can remember, I've never even encountered the word “prime” in this country before today.

Sham looked dejected. She'd been confident that she studied harder than anyone, but now she was shocked to learn that another child visiting from outside knew more than her.

"Oh, that's a shame. You're so smart," I replied.

"Um, well... I..." Sham's face turned red. "Do you really mean it?"

"Well, yeah. I'd hate it if everyone was as smart as you, because I'd be falling behind in no time."

I meant it. If this country was full of people like her, I'd have to work my butt off just to live a normal life.

"That's not true at all. You're exceptional," she said.

As much as I appreciate the compliment, there'd be something wrong if I wasn't smarter considering you're only six and I've lived more than five times that. That'd be depressing.

"Thanks."

"Would you mind teaching me more things?" she asked.

"Things like what? What interests you?"

"Everything. The whole world."

"All of it?"

A subject that explains the whole world? I guess that'd be natural history, but I'm assuming what she means is that she wants to know a little about everything.

"Actually, maybe not all of it," she corrected herself. "At least not togi or anything else my father talks about. And not knitting or embroidery either."

Poor Gok. He has such a smart daughter, but they've got no common interests. Maybe that's why he never buys her books. She should've learned togi, then made him agree to buy her something if she wins. Or she could have found some other way to butter him up and get something out of him.

"Okay, but I don't know all that much. All I can really teach you is math."

Math was the only field where I could be sure I was giving her accurate

information. This was obviously a different world, so the laws of physics could be slightly different. I could just imagine smugly giving her chemistry lecture only to later realize that none of the principles applied here. No, math was the one thing that never changed. One plus one would always be two, and π could never be a rational number like five.

“That would be just fine. Please teach me. I want to hear it all.”

Chapter 2 — The Succession Council

I

When I saw his face, it brought back so many old memories that I knew I had to be dreaming. He was a boy my age—my age back in Japan, at least—named Yahata. I hadn't seen him since we'd graduated high school. Even in the dream, I thought it was impressive that I remembered him so well.

It felt like I was watching a boring movie as the dream replayed memories of the distant past.

Yahata was in my year group through elementary, middle, and high school, which made him something of a childhood friend. He lived near my family's home, and his dad worked for a company managed by my old man.

The run-down workshop next to our house was still in operation when I was a child so, although I didn't know his dad well, he was a familiar face because he worked next door. Yahata had about the same intelligence as me, and public schools dominated in the area where we lived, so we both entered the same public high school—one with the best test scores in the region, but without any national renown.

Although our homes were close, we weren't good enough friends to travel to school together. Still, we got along well enough to talk when we saw each other. By the time we were in the last year of high school, he was studying hard in hope of getting into medical school.

One lunch break, Yahata came to me with a pale face. "I think my dad's gonna be fired..." he said.

The news was a bolt out of the blue.

I'd never been involved in the management of my family's business during high school, and ever since the run-down workshop had been demolished and the head office relocated to a business district, the whole thing felt like it had

nothing to do with me.

I knew Yahata had multiple siblings because I'd visited his home a few times in the past. If he wanted to go to medical school, the fees were going to be high.

"I don't know the details, but I can ask my dad about it," I offered, then called my dad right there.

I would've preferred to discuss it with him face-to-face, but I didn't see him often back then. I didn't really see either of them, actually—my mom had left after their divorce, which left me virtually living alone. Dad would stay with one girlfriend after another and rarely ever came back home. He must have had trust issues, though, because he kept the company seal and all rights-related paperwork at home—never at his lovers' places. He would show up the next time he needed something from the safe, but I had no idea when that would be.

"Yahata? How'd you know what happened to him?" Dad must have expected me to ask for more money to pay the bills or something, because he sounded surprised when I brought up a completely different subject.

"His oldest son's in my year. Has been since grade school."

"Ah, he went crying to his son, did he?" I could sense that my dad was sneering on the other end of the phone.

"No one's crying. But what happened?"

"He stole from the company, and the police got involved. That's an open-and-shut punitive dismissal."

"He stole something?" That was completely unexpected. *Larceny* and *corporate embezzlement* were words that came to my mind. "What'd he steal?"

"Nails and fittings," dad replied, sounding like he was boasting of his wise approach to management.

"Nails and fittings? How many did he steal?"

At this point, dad's company had grown large enough that cheap things like nails and fittings were plausibly handled in huge quantities. A veteran employee with a thorough knowledge of the company's operations could have made a

fortune just siphoning off those small items.

“Considering he used them to make a doghouse...I’d say ten thousand yen’s worth.”

I later realized that the amount he’d told me was probably an exaggeration—no one needed ten thousand yen’s worth of nails and fittings to make a doghouse. Five hundred yen might’ve been more realistic. At most, it probably would’ve cost two thousand yen.

“He used a few nails and fittings on a personal project, and you accused him of theft? Everyone does things like that.”

It was the equivalent of someone taking a pen from the office. Maybe someone with impeccable morals wouldn’t have done it, but this was no evil deed. A warning should’ve sufficed.

“Theft is theft. The police agreed.”

“You could’ve just cut his pay over a little thing like that. Why fire him?”

“Don’t tell me how to run my company. I’m done paying through the nose for cocky employees who’re stuck in the past.”

With that, he abruptly hung up.

I felt responsible, so I looked into what had happened. Later on, I would learn that my dad had looked for any excuse to rid himself of his long-serving employees. As the company grew, there was no shortage of graduates applying, and dad had come to see the hires he’d made back when he’d run a small downtown workshop as deadweight. It also must’ve coincided with the company’s operations becoming increasingly automated.

Yahata’s dad was one of those who’d been cut loose. After he casually confessed to my dad about the fittings he’d used at home, a recording of the confession was passed on to the police. They, in turn, had made a point of taking him away in front of the other employees. This elaborate approach resulted in a punitive dismissal rather than a voluntary resignation, which made him ineligible for retirement benefits under employment law.

Even in retrospect, I couldn’t see any justice in my dad’s approach to

management.

In the end, there was nothing I was able to do to make things right. I heard that Yahata had worked hard to get into medical school on a scholarship, but—since his family was in the process of being torn apart—he’d failed his entrance exam. I don’t know whether he tried again or found a job, but I doubted he ever became a doctor.



“...”

I woke up drenched in sweat, as if I’d had a nightmare. My throat was awfully dry from the effects of dehydration, and my head hurt like I had a hangover.

The dwindling firewood glowed red in the small hearth of my bedroom.

The room was warm, but I wanted the sensation of cold air to wake me up. A bitter wind blew into the room when I opened the window, and it felt as though my skin tightened in response. It was pitch black outside. After I’d stared out the window for a while, my sweat-drenched nightclothes turned ice cold, so I shut the window again.

I warmed myself a little in front of the hearth before going over to my desk. After my nightmare about things long past, I could clearly recall knowledge from over seven years ago. With the aid of an oil lamp, I carefully wrote down all the scholarly knowledge I could remember. The chill receded as I wrote. After I’d finished, I decided to go back to bed.

That was when I heard a knock at the front door.

Who would visit at this hour?

I left my room and went downstairs. As I approached the door, I heard the unmistakable sound of knocking once more.

“Who’s there?” I asked.

“Shun, a servant of the Ho family,” the person on the other side responded, their voice faint and trembling.

Now I see.

“You must want my father.” If he had business here, it could only be with Rook.

“That’s correct.”

“I’m not allowed to open the front door. I’ll wake him right away.”

“Thank you kindly.”

I entered my parents’ bedroom where Rook and Suzuya lay side by side, sleeping close to one another. I placed a hand on Rook and shook him without hesitating.

“Dad, please wake up.”

“Muh...”

No amount of jostling would wake him.

“Please wake up,” I cried while shaking him more forcefully, but to no avail.

Maybe I’ll have better luck hitting him.

“Mh... Yuri? What’s wrong?”

Suzuya had woken up instead. Thanks to the faint light from the room’s hearth, I could see she was sitting up in bed beside him.

“There’s someone at the door. He says he’s a Ho family servant.”

That made Suzuya bolt up immediately.

“Darling, please wake up.” She didn’t say it loudly—in fact, it was definitely quieter than the voice I’d used.

And yet, Rook opened his eyes and mumbled, “Ngh... Morning already?”

What a pair they are.

“Dad, there’s a servant named Shun from the head household at the door. I couldn’t let him into the house myself, so I had to leave him outside. Please go get him quick.”

The look on Rook’s face changed, and he leaped out of bed.



When Rook opened the door, there was a small, pale-faced man standing outside.

“What brings you here at this hour?” Rook asked.

“I must immediately inform you of—”

“Get inside.”

There was a fine coating of snow on the ground. Although the region was cold, the snow didn’t pile up as much as you’d expect. However, the dry, freezing air made our winters harsh, and winter had begun.

“Pardon me for intruding...” Shun said.

The living room hearth had gone out. Rook picked up the oil lamp that was illuminating the room and poured its oil onto the smoldering embers. He then used the lamp’s flaming wick to ignite the hearth. The flames grew quickly, and with the addition of a little more firewood, it became a real fire.

Suzuya dug out some embers from the ashes in the kitchen kiln and got another fire started in order to prepare some hot water.

“First, show me your hands and feet,” Rook demanded.

“I’m quite all right.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. You wouldn’t feel the damage.”

“Very well,” Shun conceded. He took off his gloves and then his socks, revealing deathly white fingers and toes.

Rook gripped Shun’s hands and gently massaged them. Then, though they must have smelled somewhat, he held Shun’s feet without a hint of reluctance and massaged his toes too.

“Your toes...should be fine,” Rook said. “I’m worried about your hands, but if you hold a hot cup, it should put them right.”

“I appreciate such kindness.”

When someone traveled by plainrunner, their legs would be half buried in the feathers, keeping them surprisingly warm. Their hands, however, would be chilled as they gripped the reins. In any case, Shun didn’t appear to have

reached the point of frostbite. That was cause for relief.

“Now you can tell me what happened,” Rook said while wiping Shun’s hands clean.

“The expedition force has returned.” Shun delivered the news with a somber face, causing Rook’s own expression to stiffen.

“And is my brother well?” Rook’s tone had changed completely, and now sounded like he was interrogating the messenger.

Shun shook his head. “Lord Gok was killed in battle.”

My mind went blank for a moment.

“No...” Rook murmured. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m afraid I’m completely serious. His body hasn’t been recovered, so we only have reports to go by, but there’s no doubt that Lord Gok has passed away.”

No body?

“What...? What do you mean the body wasn’t recovered?” Rook was clearly thinking the same thing as me.

Gok was the commanding officer. Regardless of whether he’d been killed suddenly by a stray arrow on the battlefield, or gradually succumbed to a wound that never fully healed, they would have had his body. If, however, their highest-ranking officer had been captured by the enemy, it suggested a crushing defeat.

“Lord Gok led a kingeagle strike mounted upon the eagle you gave him, and—through his valiant efforts—secured our victory.”

Rook held his breath in stunned silence for a moment. “I see... He was successful?”

“Yes.” Shun looked close to tears.

What’s a kingeagle strike? I could tell from Rook’s reaction that it was an unusual circumstance, but I didn’t know what they were talking about.

“Was the situation really that hopeless?” Rook asked.

“Yes,” Shun answered. “The expedition force lost half of its members in battle and found themselves besieged in the fortress. It was then that Lord Gok and the other sky knights of his expedition force resorted to a kineagle strike. That drove the enemy away...”

“O-Oh... I see.” The pain Rook felt upon learning of his brother’s death was visible on his face even as he tried to hold it back.

“Lord Rook, I was dispatched here to ask that you attend a family council tomorrow.”

“All right. I’ll be there.”

It was then that Suzuya entered with a basin of hot water. “I’ve heated some water for you,” she said while placing it at Shun’s feet.

“Go on. Bathe your feet,” Rook urged.

“I’m most grateful for— Ugh!” Shun sounded like he was in pain as he plunged his frozen feet in the water.

“This is for you too, if you’d like it.” Suzuya presented him with a large cup filled with tea, along with a plate of hard bread, jam, and butter. She must have toasted the bread over the same flames that heated the water.

“Thank you so much. I haven’t eaten at all today.” His hunger was obvious from the way he dug into the bread immediately.

“The whole day?” Rook asked.

“Yes. Today has been busy.”

Dawn was close to breaking, which would have made it unclear what he meant if not for the fact that mechanical clocks were so rare in this country that few people worried about what time it was once the sun went down. By the same token, when he said that the family council would happen tomorrow, he meant today after sunrise.

“That was reckless,” Rook scolded him. “It’s a miracle you got here alive.”

He was right. Riding a horse or plainrunner all night was nothing like driving a car along a highway in the dark. Obviously, the animals lacked the powerful headlights of cars, which meant that you had to ride across unpaved dirt roads

by the faint light of a burning torch.

Shun's thoughts must have been befuddled by the harsh cold of the winter night. If he'd fallen from his plainrunner, he'd likely have frozen to death where he'd landed. It was a dangerous journey at the best of times, but to attempt it while starving was madness.

"Indeed, you are correct. I had planned to eat before setting out from the manor, but...it slipped my mind."

"You can use the guest room. Once you've eaten, drink some liquor and go to sleep."

"But I couldn't—"

"If you won't sleep, you'll have to stay here tomorrow. I won't let you die by falling off a bird."

"Very well. I'll accept your kind offer and get some rest."

Rook brought out one of his favorite pieces of glassware and filled it with alcohol. Once it had been filled to the brim, he presented it to Shun.

"Make sure you drink it all. You won't sleep while your body's still chilled to the bone."

"You've shown me such kindness."

Even if Shun hadn't been cold, it was hard to sleep under such circumstances. The drink would help him forget.



When morning came, Rook, Shun, and I set out for the head household together.

Suzuya didn't need to come because it wasn't a funeral. As for why I needed to go along, I supposed that as the heir to a branch family, I was there as Rook's attendant.

We set out in the morning and entered the main household's estate before noon. In a complete change from the day of the expedition ceremony, the manor was as somber as a wake. Like everyone else, I'd come dressed all in

black despite the fact that it wasn't a funeral. As long as there was still a chance of his remains being recovered, it would be left for another day.

After we arrived, we were led to a grand parlor where we were given a little food.

Shun came to Rook and me while we hungrily ate. "Lord Rook, this is a list of those attending the council."

"Thanks." Rook cast his eye over the list of names on the parchment he was given. Something made him frown, and he rechecked the list several times. "I don't see Sir Rakunu's name. Why not?"

"Her Ladyship has forbidden Sir Rakunu from attending due to his refusal to assist in the kingeagle strike."

"What?" Rook furrowed his brow even harder. "He can't have been stripped of his knighthood for refusing to join a kingeagle strike. If he's still alive, then..."

"In Her Ladyship's opinion, a coward who abandons his lord is no knight."

This ladyship person was probably Gok's wife—Sham's mother. She must have had some sort of authority here.

"But if not Sir Rakunu, then who...?"

It sounded like Rook had been expecting this Rakunu person to be the next head of the family. At the very least, he must've thought he was a strong contender.

Even I'd heard of a relative named Rakunu. He was the head of a powerful branch family by the name of Ek. If this were Edo-period Japan, the Ek family would've been equivalent to a line of chief retainers who served successive daimyo over multiple generations. In other words, Ek was a powerful name listed among the Ho family's most senior vassals. I'd been taught that they'd adopted a bride from the Ho family during my grandfather's generation, making them our distant relatives. Even I understood how odd it was for the head of such an important household to be excluded from our family council.

"The situation is what it is. Her Ladyship has said that if there is no one better suited than Sir Rakunu, then she will resort to adopting an heir."

“She’d do that?” Rook sounded a little shocked. The idea of someone being adopted into the family mustn’t have occurred to him until now.

The suggestion worried me personally because Gok had already asked me to become their adopted son by marrying Sham. But a successor needed to be chosen immediately, and it seemed unlikely that a seven-year-old—one who wasn’t even Gok’s trueborn son, no less—would be abruptly adopted into the household and appointed head of family. The idea was absurd.

But it stood to reason that the household’s little girl might be forced to marry a young man—or perhaps even an old man—who was many times her age. I didn’t like the idea one bit.

“I see how it is,” Rook said. “Thank you.”

“Indeed. Now you must excuse me,” Shun replied before leaving the room.

With Shun gone, Rook remained slumped in his chair.

“Well, I don’t have any say in the matter. I’m just here to listen.” He sounded apprehensive, and it was unclear whether he was talking to me, or to himself.

“Are you sure about that? As Lord Gok’s brother, aren’t you a prime candidate?” I asked.

“No. Every head of the Ho family must hold a knighthood. That’s the rule.”

Oh... That makes a lot of sense.

Rook counted as one of the Ho family’s vassals, but he didn’t have a knighthood.

Knighthood was roughly equivalent to a qualification earned when graduating from a military academy—anyone who hadn’t done so would never be considered fit to command an army. It was possible to earn the qualification by graduating from the Knight Academy in the royal capital, but Rook hadn’t done so because he’d come to hate the idea and dropped out. This meant that Rook wasn’t eligible to be head of family.

But there was something else I was more eager to learn about—something that I hadn’t found a chance to ask until now. “What’s a kingeagle strike?”

“Oh... I didn’t explain it to you, did I?”

“No. Please tell me.”

“Well...I suppose it's time you knew.”

He's talking like it's a heavy topic. What is it?

“A kingeagle strike is an attack made while riding a kingeagle.”

Like a dogfight?

“Do you mean when someone fights an enemy's kingeagle in midair?”

“No.”

Okay, so not that. I suppose it's hard to imagine them fighting without guns.

There were some scenes of aerial combat in stories, but anyone trying it in real life would soon learn that it wasn't so easy to wield a spear effectively on the back of an eagle. If a rider charged someone with a spear, they'd end up slamming into the opponent with the whole eagle.

“Obviously, it's enemies on the ground that they attack.”

“Enemies on the ground?”

Sky knights weren't cavalry. Fighting while on the back of an eagle was impossible. Likewise, an eagle couldn't just lift a person up, like a fish caught from a river, and then drop them from a height. Not that they couldn't be trained to do it—the problem was that the troops on the ground could easily defend themselves by thrusting upward with a sword or spear, resulting in major injuries to the eagle, or even a crash landing. Such an approach would be far from cost effective.

“Do you mean they throw spears at the ground from above?” I asked.

“No. They charge into the center of the enemy camp and kill their general.”

I was speechless.

They do what? That's a suicide attack.

“I've never mentioned it until now because I hate kingeagle strikes.”

“Does a plan like that ever work?”

No sooner than I'd asked, I remembered that Gok had succeeded. There was

no way to know whether Gok had actually killed their general, but Shun had said that the enemy forces had retreated. They wouldn't just pull back for no reason. Whatever had happened, it had been a success. Unfortunately, he'd died in the process. Now I understood why there was no body.

"It doesn't have a high rate of success. Most attempts fail."

"I thought so."

"They fly out in large numbers at dawn and mount a surprise attack on the leader's tent. Of course, there's always a chance the general isn't there; it's also not unusual for there to be a body double dressed like a general. That makes things even harder. And then when the eagle aims for the tent, an ordinary landing isn't possible—it has to crash down with enough force to crush the enemies on the ground. Ideally, it'll crush the enemy general right there and then, but the sky knights will usually have to dismount and fight their way to him."

I see. We're talking about crash-landing into the middle of a camp filled with enemy soldiers in an attempt to wipe out their commanding officers. Pure madness.

"It sounds easy enough, but it's rare that anyone pulls it off," Rook continued.

"I can imagine."

Of course it's difficult. And it's a waste of life, at that.

Kingeagles couldn't be factory farmed like broilers. A long period of careful rearing and training was essential for each and every kingeagle. The same was true of the rider. And it wasn't like they just needed to ride the birds either—they also needed to fight, which meant that every rider needed both flight training *and* combat training up to the level of a first-class knight. Throwing kingeagles at the enemy en masse like leftover vegetables could easily result in them all dying before any harm came to the enemy general. In fact, they could even be attacking the wrong place, which would be a pointless waste of human and eagle lives. All in all, it was a nasty business.

On the other hand, it couldn't be denied that it created a chance to turn the tide of battle. Even if the odds were one in a hundred, it could be worth

attempting when the only alternative was being caught between a rock and a hard place that would eventually result in everyone's death.

"But my brother did it. That's how incredible he was," Rook spoke, sadness in his eyes.

"You're right."

The achievement made Gok a first-rate warrior.

"Do all sky knights have to join in kingeagle strikes?" I asked.

Sky knights were the knights who rode on kingeagles. Needless to say, merely riding on a kingeagle didn't make someone like Rook a sky knight.

"No, but...the ones who carry out kingeagle strikes are held in the highest regard."

"What does that mean for someone like Rakunu?"

"Sky knights attempt kingeagle strikes of their own free will; no leader can force them into it, no matter how high-ranking. So when they attack as a group, it's up to individuals to decide whether they want to join or not."

"I see..."

It didn't sound like a standard military operation. If they had no right to refuse, they'd be forced to go along with whatever orders a stupid commander might give, no matter how ridiculous the timing. If they were going to give up their lives, then it was human nature to demand that their sacrifice be meaningful and carried out under the orders of a competent and respected leader.

But this country was run by an aristocracy, and that wasn't a good system for ensuring that capable commanders rose to the top. The right to refuse had most likely become ingrained in our culture out of necessity. In Gok's case, the situation must have been dire enough to call for such drastic measures. When Rakunu had refused, it might have been acceptable in theory, but it wouldn't be ignored in practice.

Before long we heard a knock at the door, and a female attendant entered. "The council attendees are gathering now. If you'll allow me, I'll guide you

there.”

“Good luck.” I waved off Rook with a smile... Or at least, I tried to.

“What are you saying? Get up.”

“Huh? I need to attend?”

That can't be right. What's the point in a little kid like me attending the council?

“Of course you do. Why do you think I brought you?”

“Um... Because it would look bad if you had no one attending to you?”

“No—because they summoned both of us. Your name's written right here.”

Rook lifted up the list of names that he'd been given a moment ago and waved it in front of me.



“I don't understand why I'm going.”

It was odd. I was just a boy.

“Because Sham was his only direct descendant,” Rook said. “It's just how it is.”

“Will they call for Sham too?”

“She hasn't been called for yet, but she will be if she's needed. In your case... Well, it would be rude if you were summoned here and left outside, wouldn't it?”

“Okay...”

I wouldn't think it was rude at all. They should forget about me.

“This is the room. The council will take place here,” the female attendant announced as she opened a pair of double doors made from two huge wooden slabs.

The interior was as elegant and spacious as the doors had suggested. A large table—created by combining three smaller rectangular tables and decorated with an elaborately embroidered cloth—lay in the dead center of the room, but

there was still plenty of empty space around it. It was a fine room for holding a council.

Chairs were arranged around the table. Most of them were already occupied by attendees, both young and old. Though when I looked around, I noted that old men made up the majority. Given the longevity of the Shanti, some of them could have been over a hundred years old.

Ho family customs dictated that the head of the family couldn't retain their role into advanced old age—they would generally relinquish their position to the younger generation as soon as they began to weaken. As the leader of the Ho family, they needed to be ready for war whenever it might occur. And since they needed to maintain command of the family's forces, train soldiers, and lead them into battle, no one wanted a situation where an elderly figure had to hand over command to their son in the event of war. It was therefore desirable for the head to step down as soon as their age might have made it difficult to head out into battle.

That all seemed reasonable, but it was odd just how many old men were here attending the council. I guessed that some of these elders had previously stepped down from their positions to allow an heir to take their place, but they'd returned to service after the head of the family had died in battle. The fact that so many of them had been made to gather here suggested that the Ho family was short of hands now that the family's forces had suffered such heavy losses.

We're in real bad shape.

The attendant showed us into the room and led us toward our seats, taking us deeper and deeper into the room. We were taken to the top of the table beside a sullen, ill-looking woman. On the wall behind her was a great tapestry with the Ho family crest sewn onto it. The attendant gave us a brief bow and then left us there, as if to say this was where we should sit.

Hang on. Isn't this the head of the table?

There was no mistaking it—this was indeed the top of the table, where the most important figures sat. I'd been expecting us to sit at the very bottom. The whole thing gave me a bad feeling.

Rook took a step forward and greeted the woman in an unusual way. “My apologies for not writing more often, Lady Satsuki. It is a great honor to—”

“Enough of that,” she dismissed Rook with an awkward smile. Her tone was devoid of energy. “You needn’t call me lady.”

I guessed that this was Gok’s wife, Satsuki Ho. It was hard to compare her to others, given that the stress she currently faced had left her face so withered and pale, but she looked close to Suzuya’s age. Actually, I’d say she had to be at least ten years older than Suzuya. The effects of aging set in slowly for the Shanti, making it difficult to discern a difference of ten years sometimes.

Satsuki had the air of a refined lady from a noble family. My mom was a lively and animated person in my mind because I often saw her busy with housework, but my aunt here appeared much more subdued.

“Please don’t make me blush. Call me Satsuki as you did in the past,” she continued.

“Very well, Satsuki.”

“This must be your son.” Satsuki looked at me with kindness in her eyes.

“That’s right. Go on and introduce yourself,” Rook told me.

“Nice to meet you, Aunt Satsuki. I’m Yuri.” I bowed my head to her.

I hope “Aunt Satsuki” is polite enough.

“Hello,” she replied. “My, how you’ve grown. Last time I saw you, you were just a baby.”

Apparently, this wasn’t our first meeting, but we hadn’t seen each other at all since I was a baby. I hadn’t had a chance to meet her during the recent expedition ceremony.

“He’s my amazing son,” Rook added.

Now you’re embarrassing me.

“Isn’t he?” Satsuki replied. “Even Sham is in love with him.”

Her words left Rook looking stunned. He’d probably never spoken to Sham, although I couldn’t imagine what the two of them would even talk about.

“I heard that you and her had a lot in common,” Satsuki continued.

“Yes...but she’s a lot smarter than me,” I replied.

“Oh, you don’t mean that.”

I honestly do.

When I was Sham’s age, my only concern was finding a way to get hold of new batteries for my Game Boy—they’d always run out so fast. And that was despite getting an education at a good elementary school. Meanwhile, Sham had educated herself to the point where she was thinking about prime numbers. The gap between us was immeasurable. It made me want to support her efforts to educate herself.

“You can’t just stand there the whole time. Why not sit? Rook, your place is there,” Satsuki instructed, pointing to a chair near to her.

That must mean I’ll be sandwiched between Satsuki and Rook. Why can’t I just be left alone?

“I was feeling blue. Having a youngster beside me is cheering me up. Thank you for that,” she said.

“We’re honored to be of service,” Rook told her.

Don’t I get a say? I complained internally as I looked at my seat. But what’s with this? Seriously, what’s the deal here?

“What’s wrong, Yuri? Sit down.” Rook had already taken his seat, and he encouraged me to do the same when he saw me simply standing there.

If I could sit on this thing, I would.

“I *could* attempt to jump up onto it, but I’m worried that might make it topple over and cause a scene.”

An extra thick cushion had been placed on the chair to turn it into a makeshift high chair just for me, but that only made it harder to climb up. If the chair had legs that were joined together by some horizontal support beams, they would’ve made a good ladder, but unfortunately that wasn’t the case.

“Well if you can’t get up, why didn’t you say so?” Rook grabbed me with both

hands, lifted me up, and sat me down like a doll.

It was really embarrassing to be treated like that in front of a bunch of strangers.

II

The council hadn't begun yet, so hushed murmurs of small talk filled the room. I also quietly chatted while I drank concentrated barley tea, taking great care not to spill it on the ornate tablecloth.

Then, after a little time had passed, the council commenced. The room fell silent as Satsuki prepared to speak.

"I'd like to thank you all for gathering here today. As I'm sure you are all aware, my husband, Gok Ho, lost his life several days ago as a result of his valiant actions in battle while serving as the Kilhina expedition force's leader. He passed into the next world together with the eagle that had been his companion in both life and death, and I'm sure he's looking down on us from somewhere above the clouds right now. I'd like us to begin with a brief moment of silence to pay respect to the spirits of all those who fell on the distant battlefield."

Satsuki clapped her hands once.

"Please join me in silent prayer," she said ceremoniously.

Everyone quietly began to pray.

After about thirty seconds had passed, Satsuki broke the silence. "Thank you. As those of us still living, it is our responsibility to consider the future of the Ho family. We are fortunate that my husband considered what might become of us and left behind a will. I consider this a blessing upon us—we needn't debate, nor speculate, over what my husband would or wouldn't have wanted. His dying wishes are concealed right here."

Satsuki produced a single dirty, bloodied envelope from her pocket as she spoke. It was sealed with bright red wax, hastily applied and dripping down in strange trails. From my position beside her, I could see "To my wife, Satsuki, from Gok Ho" written on its surface in a messy scrawl. This was surely his will,

and—judging by its grim appearance—had been rescued from the battlefield.

“I will now unseal it.”

Using a letter opener that had been placed on the desk in preparation, Satsuki broke open the envelope’s seal. As if to reassure us that we were dealing with the genuine item, she turned the envelope upside down and let its contents fall onto the tablecloth. There was a flutter of parchment as a letter fell out.

“I would like all those present to view the letter in turn. If you will allow me, I’ll be the first to read it.”

Satsuki picked up the letter and began reading.

“I shall read it aloud... ‘I, Gok Ho, twenty-seventh head of the Ho family, nominate my brother, Rook Ho, as the next head of family.’ The will ends there.”

Uh-oh. I knew it. That was exactly what I’d been dreading.

I glanced over at my dad and could read his shocked reaction from his face. After what he’d said while we were waiting for the council to begin, I knew he’d hadn’t foreseen this.

Rook had trusted his brother to know what sort of man he was, and he’d also believed in the practice of requiring each head to hold a knighthood. It was only a short while ago that he’d confidently told me, “Every head of the Ho family must hold a knighthood. That’s the rule.” But that must have been Rook’s own assumption, or at the very least, it couldn’t have been an absolute rule.

“I’m sorry, but I must stop you there.” One of the old men near the head of the table spoke out. As you’d expect from someone who’d long served in a family of warriors, his voice was hoarse, yet powerful. “I don’t believe Rook has a knighthood.”

Unsurprisingly, this was going to be the sticking point. There was no doctrine of civilian control here. It made no sense for someone without a knighthood to be head of family. This was presumably why the idea hadn’t sat well with this old man.

“You are correct,” Satsuki told him. “Rook has no knighthood. But that is a

matter I've already discussed with Her Majesty the Queen. She will permit an exception to be made."

Rook was also still struggling to accept his situation, if his dumbfounded face was any indication.

"As you are all already aware, the Ho family's domain is at the tip of the peninsula, south of the Royal Territory—we rule over the warmest, most fertile land in the kingdom. This is why it has always been the responsibility of the Ho family to provide military aid to foreign nations," Satsuki explained.

The Ho family has the most fertile land in the kingdom? I didn't know that.

But it seemed that with great lands came great responsibility. That was one reason—the ostensible one—that we drew the short straw so often. The true reason was different.

The Ho family was at the tip of the peninsula, south of the Royal Territory. In other words, the royal capital of Sibiak and every other chieftain family's domain lay north of Ho Province. In the same way that the Kilhina Kingdom shielded the Shiyalta Kingdom, those other domains created a wall around us, and we wouldn't find ourselves under threat until the very end.

From the queen's point of view, the Ho family's forces couldn't be relied upon in the worst-case scenario. Territories in front of the royal capital would fight fiercely to save their own skins, while anyone behind them would have ample time to flee rather than putting up a serious fight. That was why we were made to send reinforcements abroad before everyone else, allowing the other, closer chieftain families to preserve their strength.

At least, that was my assessment. I wasn't just being distrustful, I was giving the situation proper consideration. It was a natural way for any politician to think.

"The recent fighting has finally depleted the Ho family's forces, and we now struggle to keep our orders of knights at full power. Her Majesty has been understanding of our circumstances, and has asked us to focus on rebuilding our army until we recover our former strength. Our situation is exceptional, and our head of family needn't be a knight for the time being," Satsuki explained.

She even got the queen involved in her political maneuvers. I don't think Rook has a way out of this one.

Right from the start, before Satsuki had even opened the will, we'd been guided to the top of the table, so she must have known what the will was going to say. Perhaps she'd heard it from Gok prior to the expedition, or maybe she'd had the will opened and resealed. Either way, she'd gotten us good by opting for a surprise attack. If Rook had known in advance, he could have simply stayed home and sent a letter that stated, "I cannot accept this role." Satsuki had prevented that.

"Satsuki," Rook finally collected himself and spoke. "You certainly do me a great honor, but...I'm ill-suited for this role. Please allow me to decline."

I figured he'd say that. That makes me wonder why Gok chose Rook in the first place. What was he thinking? Rook's obviously the wrong choice.

"Fear not, Rook. I can't deny that there will be some changes, but you can continue to live your life as you've been doing if you so choose," Satsuki answered.

Oh? How come?

"We are capable of running everything from here."

They'll make Rook a figurehead? So it'll be Satsuki who's really in charge... But I know he won't let her do that.

"You'll manage the Ho family's dealings, Satsuki? I'm...not sure I can agree."

As expected, Rook didn't like the idea. It wasn't that either of us had an issue with Satsuki managing the family, but some of the others here would consider it a great taboo. Frankly, it wasn't likely to work out.

The problem was that this country had well-defined roles for men and women—the monarch and central government figures were women, while the military commanders were men. At a glance, it might've seemed as though men were at odds with women across the whole kingdom, and that women in chieftain families were being oppressed and discriminated against. But that wasn't the truth. In reality, women had the power to order the nation to go to war, so if our armies were also under their command, men would have no role other than

to be maimed and killed on the battlefield. The men of the kingdom wouldn't stand for such an arrangement, so they demanded that the entire military be left in their hands. There was a tacit understanding in place.

Perhaps if Satsuki had attended the Knight Academy and gained a knighthood, her status might have made the arrangement palatable, but she'd more than likely graduated from the Cultural Academy—a school that taught politics. There'd be no avoiding the ire of the knights in that case.

"Though if you'd prefer, you're quite welcome to bring your talents to bear while serving as the head of family. My attendants and I would make every effort to assist you."

Would they? I'm starting to get suspicious.

"But there must be others who are better suited," Rook argued.

"The only other candidates are distant relatives. There are three, but—although they all possess knighthoods—none of them hold a noble rank greater than lord-knight, and two of them aren't even subjects of the Ho family."

I wasn't educated enough to understand what a peerage was, but not being a subject of the Ho family probably meant they were born of women who'd left the Ho family to marry into a family from another province. It would be like a country appointing a foreigner as their king. No one was going to accept that.

I had to wonder whether this Rakunu guy we'd been talking about earlier was being considered. If I remembered rightly, he was a close relative descended from members of the Ho head household.

"I might add that the Knight Academy still holds records of Rook's credits. Of the three hundred required credits, Rook was awarded two hundred and ninety, and he had also won an award of distinction. Rook, if you were to begin applying for a knighthood now, you could obtain it very quickly."

Really? Sounds like he dropped out right before graduating. Why didn't he just stick with it a little longer? Though maybe he didn't want to graduate with a knighthood in case it made him an honorary soldier in some sort of reserve force.

"I'm painfully aware of how poorly suited I am to knighthood," Rook replied.

“It was for that reason that I dropped out, so I couldn’t possibly...”

I thought he’d say that.

I had great respect for my dad and knew he was exceptional, but I never thought he’d make a good soldier. Rook must have been fully aware of it himself when he abandoned his family’s traditions despite all the commotion it would inevitably cause.

It was becoming increasingly unclear why Rook’s older brother had chosen him to be the next head of family. Then again, Gok was the same man who’d once drawn a knife on me, so maybe he wasn’t exactly the rational type.

“You need not worry,” Satsuki replied. “Your appointment as head of family would be considered a temporary measure.”

Oh? Temporary?

“Your son could take over as the ruler of Ho Province upon graduating from the Knight Academy in the near future.”

Rook’s son? Who’s that? Did he have another son besides me? Oh, boy. This is all getting too much. Suzuya’s gonna be furious, I just know it. I’m gonna have to cover for my dad somehow—no, wait... What if she means me?

“Wha—?!” Rook cried, bolting out of his chair. “My son won’t be a knight! Er, not that I mean to make that decision for him...but I certainly won’t force him!”

Rook was driven by fatherly love. For him, it must have felt wrong to force his son into the bloody life of a soldier.

That’s admirable. I respect him all the more for it.

“Perhaps you won’t have to. Doesn’t every young boy aspire to be a knight?” Satsuki asked.

“That may be, but—! He’s too young to bear this responsibility!”

Maybe I should say something? Truth is, this is the last thing I want. I’m no patriot. I don’t hate living in this country, but I don’t want to take up arms or die for it.

“If he refuses, it would be no problem. We would turn to Sham in such a case.

If Yuri is unsuited to the role at the time of his graduation, then I'll make it my responsibility to find her a husband who'd make a good leader. By then, Sham will be old enough to marry."

Does that mean children aren't allowed to get married in Shanti society? Well, that's good to know, but...does it really give me a way out?

"Very well..." Rook mumbled.

All the energy he'd shown just a moment ago was completely gone, and he sat down as if to concede. And with that, his anger quickly dissipated as if he'd just taken a cold shower. Now would've been the perfect time to passionately argue.

Man... Is there really no getting out of it?

I gathered from conversations we'd had at home that Rook had never spoken to Sham. If everything went according to Satsuki's plan, our families would end up growing closer over the span of the next ten years. Rook would learn what sort of girl she was, and he'd come to know that she was unlikely to get on well with whatever husband they gave her. That, and someone like him would sympathize with his niece too much to force her into an unhappy marriage.

Chances were, I'd have no way out.

But that hadn't seemed to cross Rook's mind. And since I was just a child, there was no way I could explain Sham's personality to Rook.

Rook glanced at me briefly. He seemed to be thinking, *Would I be a bad father if I refused to become the head of family and robbed my son of the future opportunity?*

Ugh... This is a horrible situation, I lamented to myself. Is Gok's will so absolute that all it needs is Rook's acceptance? Or will they hold a vote with all of the lords here today? If it's the latter, I could try throwing a tantrum like a spoiled brat. It'd kind of be like a bid for their support, but the opposite... But if the matter is already settled, then lashing out like a spoiled brat won't achieve anything besides casting doubt over Rook's ability to govern. Before I try anything, I'd better figure out what procedure they're using.

"Dad—"

But before I could ask, we heard thundering footsteps from outside the room.

“Stop right there!” one of the manor’s staff cried, trying to stop the approaching figure.

Then, with a loud *bam*, the door to the room was thrown open.

Now what’s happening?

“Hah... You thought you could hold a council without me?!”

An old man, much older than Gok, had suddenly appeared before us. He was out of breath, but he spoke in a high-handed tone. I reckoned he was about fifty.

I had an idea of who he was, but I couldn’t be sure just yet.

“Ahh...” Satsuki put her head in her hands and sighed.

“Is that Rakunu?” I whispered to Rook.

I hadn’t met Rakunu during the expedition ceremony, so this was likely the first time I’d seen his face.

“Yes, that’s Sir Rakunu,” Rook answered softly.

I see. I don’t know what happened, but it looks like he made it in time. I’ll just wait and see how it plays out. With any luck, this old man could be the solution to all my problems.

“Rakunu, how dare you show your face before me?” Satsuki’s voice was ice cold.

“What are you saying?! How can Lord Gok’s very wife deny her husband his dying wish?!”

Huh? Isn’t Satsuki doing her best to follow Gok’s will to the letter? It’s been causing me huge problems in the process. Is there more to it?

“What? Who would make such an accusation?” Satsuki demanded.

“I’m making it! I don’t know what lies you told to the lords gathered here, but your treacherous tongue won’t work on me!”

My intuition told me that he was in a hurry. Rakunu was like someone

ascending a staircase multiple steps at a time—his arguments moved too fast to be complete.

He only just got here, but he's not stopping to listen to what Satsuki has to say. He can't possibly know what she will say, and yet he's already calling her a liar. It's like he's just arguing for the sake of shutting Satsuki down.

"Y-You truly know no shame... First you flee the battlefield, and now..."

I looked at Satsuki and noticed her facial muscles twitching with rage. Rakunu had definitely touched a nerve.

Rakunu ignored Satsuki and pointed to one of the lords—or, rather, to Gok's will as it made its way through the hands of those seated around the table.

"What's the parchment you're holding?"

"Gok's will. But that's none of your business," Satsuki told him.

"Pardon me," Rakunu blurted out before striding into the room and plucking the will from the lord currently holding it.

"Hah!" he cried while reading it. "Women use the lowest forms of deception."

Deception?

Rakunu produced another piece of parchment from his pocket.

"The true will is right here! That one is a forgery!" he bellowed.



Rakunu was now standing right in front of Satsuki and holding up his own version of the will. There was no doubt he didn't want her to touch it.

The text of the will he held was as follows:

Last Will and Testament

I hereby appoint Rakunu Ek as the next head of the Ho Family.

It is my expectation he will achieve great things commensurate with such an esteemed position.

Gok Ho

Gok sure left a lot of trouble for us. I can't believe he made two wills, and completely different ones at that. Maybe he wrote one after getting really drunk one night and then forgot what he'd said. Either way, it sure puts us in a tight spot. I had no idea the guy was so careless. Okay, maybe not. One of them has to be fake.

Satsuki's will was now back with her. I looked at one, then the other. Sure enough, the handwriting was the same on both versions—for the most part. When I compared the pen strokes though, I noticed the word “testament” was clearly written differently. Rakunu wasn't foolish enough to bring us a will that he'd written himself, but I was still sure that his was fake.

Although I didn't exactly trust Satsuki, Rakunu's behavior was just too suspicious. The content of his will was also a little odd.

Maybe I was nitpicking, but I found the text to be overly formal. It had a tone that you'd expect from a written military command. Rather than forging the will himself, Rakunu had probably employed professional counterfeiters. But even professionals couldn't replicate handwriting they'd never seen, so they must've examined other documents written by Gok and copied the writing from those. Written instructions given to the Ek household had likely influenced the will they'd written. As one of Gok's most important vassals, Rakunu probably had a stack of official documents like that.

The will must've been produced by copying words written in multiple documents, like a ransom note pieced together from newspaper clippings. But no matter how many documents the forgers had, the word “testament” was unlikely to appear on any of them. And while Satsuki's will was written in a naturally flowing Shanish cursive, Rakunu's will included some slightly unnatural spaces between the letters.

Unfortunately, there was no use pointing any of this out because handwriting analysis wasn't an established practice in this world.

“Well? Lost your tongue at the sight of the real will, have you?” Rakunu sneered.

“This is preposterous...”

They were arguing right behind me, and since there were no arms on my chair, I was easily able to turn around to face them both. Satsuki's face was pale. Her rage must have been so intense that the blood drained from her head.

"I can't believe there was such a scoundrel among the Ho family's vassals! The Ek family knows no shame!" she cried, her loud voice echoing through the room. It carried an overpowering force that was hard to imagine coming from someone so small. If her emotions could carry energy, then a voice like hers would've blown through the room like a storm.

Satsuki pointed an accusing finger and glared at Rakunu. "I have already been informed that you abandoned your duty and fled while my husband headed to his death! To show up with a forgery and pass it off as his will... You are beneath contempt!"

Rakunu fled? That's a big deal.

I didn't know the finer details, but I knew that the right to refuse a kingeagle strike was different from fleeing the battlefield entirely.

The only reason the Ek family was able to openly collect taxes from their fief and order their subjects was because the Ho family had given them that right. In exchange, they had an obligation to join battles and obey the orders of their lord. So although a kingeagle strike might not have been part of the deal, he was still obligated to continue with his ordinary duties even after refusing. Fleeing would have meant abandoning the majority of soldiers—the ones without eagles—and leaving them to fend for themselves.

And Rakunu hadn't just wandered off while they were marching; he'd fled from a besieged and isolated fortress while he was riding on a kingeagle. That amounted to desertion in the face of the enemy.

Everything began to make sense to me. *Oh, now I get it. Fleeing was all part of his plan.*

"Enough of your nonsense!" Rakunu cried. "Lord Gok entrusted the Ho family to me and asked me to escape so that I could deliver his will!"

So that's the story he's come up with. He's given it some thought.

"How ridiculous! I have it on the word of several soldiers that you deserted! If

you'd been entrusted with the family headship—”

I'd expected her to finish with, “...then you'd have told someone before running off,” or, “...before you withdrew,” but Rakunu cut her off before she could finish her sentence.

“How *dare* you speak down to me about a battle you never attended! A soldier preparing for a kingeagle strike would *never* write their will in front of their men—the effect on their morale could be the difference between success and failure!” he bellowed.

He obviously prepared all his arguments in advance, and his voice is so loud that Satsuki has no chance of arguing him down. Hmm...

“This will was brought back to us by Sir Shula Rosk! Do you mean to cast suspicion on a member of the Rosk family when the Ho family trusts them above any other?” Satsuki replied.

“To hell with them! You have them all in your damn pocket!”

What a way to talk to your lord's widow.

I started to feel sorry for Satsuki. Rakunu kept her on the defensive with a carefully prepared story and a comeback ready for every objection. Satsuki, on the other hand, hadn't been ready for this onslaught. Coming up with the right responses was hard for someone who lacked the talent for it. This situation didn't demand rational thought; it required someone with the ability to quickly understand the structure of an argument and point out the flaws.

When debating in front of an audience, the atmosphere of the room was everything. I'd seen many cases where a smart person with all the right facts failed to keep up with their opponent's fallacious reasoning and ended up a laughingstock when they appeared to lose the debate. It was pointless to reflect on what should've been after being argued into a corner.

To make matters worse, the blood was clearly going to Satsuki's head. Rakunu had her at a clear disadvantage.

Their argument went on like that for about thirty minutes.

“Well... What evidence do you have that your forgery is the real will?” Satsuki

demanded.

“I need no evidence because Lord Gok handed it to me himself. There can be no greater proof,” Rakunu shot back.

The debate was slowing down and starting to go around in circles. There was no hope of a resolution. It was obvious that neither could verify the authenticity of their will.

I’d expected the fingerprints on the parchment to act as proof, but close inspection revealed that they were too smudged to make out the fine details. Parchment lacked the smooth surface of printer paper, and its fuzzy surface caught dirt and soot that made fingerprints hard to examine. The only evidence anyone had was spoken testimony.

“If you have no evidence, then we must assume that your will is fake,” Satsuki concluded.

“Your testimony has been suspicious from the outset. Who is to say that the Rosk family weren’t deceived by your wives?”

“You dare besmirch the honor of other families?! The Rosks have treated you well for generations!”

“They have, but this discussion isn’t about them. You know that!”

Rakunu took his eyes off Satsuki and glared at the lords in the room.

“I would never make these claims in jest. I stand here before you because Lord Gok bequeathed his will to me! I have no patience for fools who try to claim otherwise!”

Hmm... Now he’s putting pressure on the lords. They don’t look like a bunch of cowards, but even though they’re not afraid of Rakunu, they’re not willing to defy him openly.

I understood that their fence-sitting was the smart thing for them to do. The lords who’d gathered here didn’t hold any particular love for Satsuki, Rook, or me... Well, not that anyone was thinking about me in the first place.

Rook had abandoned the path of knighthood, so he obviously wasn’t a qualified knight. They probably didn’t think he was a bad person, but in their

eyes, he was more like a merchant or a farmer. Why would they want to be led by people like us?

As for Satsuki, she was nothing more than Gok's wife. While she might have been chairing the council, she was merely a facilitator. It wasn't like she commanded any particular respect.

From the other lords' point of view, Satsuki's will would just mean that Rook would become the next head of family. It wasn't a particularly promising future. You could argue that Rook was the more legitimate heir in terms of bloodline, which might've earned him the support of strong believers in that method of inheritance, but that was about it.

All in all, opposing Rakunu—and thus drawing his ire—wasn't a smart idea. He would probably hold a grudge, and who knew what might happen to people who angered him. On the other hand, anyone making an enemy of Rook and Satsuki could rely on their good natures. They were unlikely to retaliate too harshly against anyone who apologized and declared their support after the fact.

Everything about this situation puts Rakunu at an advantage.

There was no chance of turning the situation around with a verbal argument. What I wanted now was to hold a strategy meeting.

"Dad, dad." I tugged on Rook's sleeve, who was sitting next to me, looking very uncomfortable.

"What?" Rook asked, moving his ear closer.

"Why don't we take a break?"

"A break?"

The idea didn't seem to please him. He'd have to get in between the two butting heads to ask for a recess.

I guess it's not that easy. But there's got to be a way...

"I need the toilet."

After a little thought, I'd decided that natural bodily functions were a convenient excuse, as embarrassing as it was.

“What? Now?”

“Yes. I can’t help it. Could you ask them to take a short break?” I pleaded.

“Well, I...”

“Please. I’m g-gonna pee myself...”

Now it was *really* embarrassing.

“Fine.”

Phew. I moved my mouth away from Rook’s ear.

Rook hesitated for a moment, then he steeled himself and stood up. The argument between Satsuki and Rakunu immediately stopped.

“Sorry, but might we take a short break? My son needs to use the bathroom.”

Hey! You didn’t have to call me out!

“Oh... You do?” Satsuki looked at me, taken off guard.

“Yes... Sorry about him,” Rook apologized on my behalf.

My dad’s blunt approach made my head spin. *I’ll get through this, but if you had a daughter instead of a son, she’d have definitely resented you for it.*

“It has been quite some time since the council started. Might we?” Rook asked again.

“I suppose...” Satsuki agreed.

Never mind supposing. Just take a break. It’s not like you’re making any progress here.

“Let’s take a short break. After which, we’ll resume.”



“Huh? Don’t you need to go to the bathroom, Yuri?” Rook asked.

“Please take me there, dad.”

I didn’t actually need the toilet, I just needed to talk to my dad alone.

“Oh... You don’t know the way? Do you mind, Satsuki?”

“Hm?” Satsuki blurted out.

She seemed a little frazzled. Her brain must have gone into sleep mode as soon as she was suddenly released from the intense stress.

“I’m going to take my son to the bathroom.”

“Oh, that’s fine. Though please be quick about it.”

“Pardon us for one moment,” I said with a bow of my head before leaving the room with Rook.

Once we were out in the corridor I said, “Okay, dad. Is there an empty room somewhere around here?”

“Hm? Don’t you need the toilet?”

“I was lying.”

Rook was taken aback. He had no way of knowing why I’d lie like that.

“Then what’s wrong? Did you want to eat something?”

Dad... Is that how you see me?

“I wanted you alone so that the two of us could discuss our family’s future.”

“Oh? Well, sure...”

Rook opened the door to a nearby room. He knew the family home well enough to find an empty spot.

I remained standing while Rook sat down on the nearest chair.

“Are you going to accept and become head of the Ho family?”

“That depends on whether they vote for me.”

So there really is an election. Figures. They wouldn’t have gathered all the lords if there wasn’t, and it would’ve been odd if Satsuki made the decision alone.

“Maybe you should forget the whole thing. Why don’t we just go home?” I suggested.

Rook looked at me in surprise. “But why? I can’t leave right now. This council’s important. If you really want to leave, I could get someone to take you back. How about that?”

No, that's totally missing the point...

"Dad... Are you really ready to accept the result without thinking it over first?"

"Well, yes. I don't like the idea because I'm no knight, but I can't ignore my brother's wishes. He must have written that will for a reason."

I figured he'd see it that way. Rook had a lot of respect for his brother.

"And what if you lose? Wouldn't it mean that Rakunu rules over the whole province? Won't he have our household killed as revenge?"

"Uh..." Rook started to speak, but then stopped. As expected, he had to think about it. "I don't think he'd do that..."

"Are you sure? History books are full of stories of the winner disposing of the losers after battles for authority."

I wasn't just referring to Earth's history either—a quick skim through books on the history of the Shanti people revealed many such cases too. Although the Shanti's bodies functioned a little differently, their customs barely varied from those of humans. I'd encountered a good number of odd practices, but everything they did turned out to have a reasonable explanation. Shanti thinking wasn't fundamentally different from human thinking.

"Don't worry about that. If it comes to it, I'll work something out," Rook tried to reassure me.

I'm sure Rook would do whatever it takes to protect us in the worst-case scenario. He's no fool, so he'd probably come up with a solution if push came to shove, but that doesn't mean we can kick back and relax. You can handle a problem with a noisy neighbor that way, but this is different.

"I believe in you, dad. But wouldn't it be better to prevent trouble from starting in the first place? At the very least, we shouldn't get on Rakunu's bad side."

"I haven't done that... Have I?" Rook sounded somewhat concerned.

I was making him worry about how the situation looked from others' point of view.

"I think things have gone well so far. It's just that Satsuki might convince you

to use some strong words against Rakunu. That could cause problems.”

“You’re right. Hmm...”

“Honestly, I think the best plan is to just leave right now... But since they’re waiting for us, please try your best not to make an enemy of Rakunu.”

That was my biggest fear.

“All right. You sure worry a lot,” Rook replied.

Who wouldn’t? This could tear the whole family apart.

“All right, let’s head back,” I said.

Our discussion had gone smoothly, but when we opened the door of the room we were in, we found Satsuki waiting for us. “What were the two of you talking about?”

The pressure she was under made it sound like this was an interrogation.

“S-Satsuki... We didn’t talk about anything,” Rook stuttered. He looked scared of his sister-in-law, but it was more likely just guilt.

“Rook, you’re just causing more problems for me. We need to face him head-on,” Satsuki sighed.

No, that’s what’ll cause problems.

I decided that I needed to talk to Satsuki.

“Satsuki... Do you mind if I call you that? I want to talk to you about something. Could you spare a moment with me?”

“Oh? But I’m rather busy...”

“I think we need to hold a strategy meeting. If you’ve got a plan, would you be able to share it with me?”

“Well...all right,” Satsuki reluctantly accepted.

III

That night, I headed to Rakunu’s room alone.

Rakunu had boldly claimed a room for himself within the manor once he'd realized that Satsuki didn't have full control over any troops of her own.

As I reached the area where Rakunu's room was located, I saw a pair of soldiers—presumably his forces—standing guard. They each held a spear in one hand, with the blade sheathed and the butt resting against the floor, but they were currently relaxing against the wall.

"E-Excuse me..."

"Hm? Whose child are you?" a young soldier replied.

His approach was cautious as he tried to figure out whether I was one of the children brought along by the nobles.

"I'm Yuri, Rook's son," I said with an overly deep bow of my head.

"Ah. Rook...?" He seemed unsure how to react, as if I'd just told him that I was on the side of the enemy. I got the sense he was a good guy. "Do you have some business here?"

"My dad told me to come here to give a message to Rakunu. Is Rakunu here?"

The two soldiers looked at each other. They were probably thinking, *He sent his own son here by himself? Is he for real?*

Truth was, I hadn't told Rook I was here.

This time it was the second, older soldier who replied. "No, he's not. He's out."

As expected, Rakunu wasn't here. That was predictable, really. Only a brainless candidate would be slacking off on the eve of an election. That also explained why there were only two soldiers stationed—security could be relaxed while the master wasn't here for them to protect.

"I believe it's urgent business. Would you allow me to wait here until Rakunu returns?" I pleaded.

"Ohh..." the younger soldier mumbled vaguely before the other soldier raised a flat palm to gesture to him to stop.

The two turned their backs on me and conferred in whispered voices, but

their discussion ended quickly.

“Fine. You can wait in this room over here.”

The soldiers showed me to another nearby room. Inside, I found the room lit by the flames of a hearth. It was the complete opposite of a parlor room from Japan’s Heian period—it was a luxurious-looking guest room filled with furnishings made by artisans. Nothing in here looked like the rough work of a local carpenter, only further serving to demonstrate the family’s wealth.

I wasn’t sure what they did to earn all that money, but even Rook still had to pay substantial taxes to maintain his noble status, so taxes gathered across a broad region must’ve been a good source of income.

“Take a seat and wait here,” a soldier instructed.

“Thank you.” I gave them another over-the-top bow and then trotted across the luxurious room to sit on the sofa.

The younger of the two soldiers remained. He closed the door and then waited by the entrance as if guarding over it. He must have wanted to keep an eye on me so that I wouldn’t cause any trouble. I was actually glad at how little suspicion they’d shown.

“Can I call you ‘sir’?” I asked the younger soldier. He only looked about twenty years old.

“Sure. What’s up?” He spoke to me casually, suggesting he was good with kids.

“Can we talk since there’s nothing else to do? I want to know what it’s like to be a knight.”

“A knight? I’m guessing your dad’s never told you?” It sounded like he had some knowledge of Rook’s unusual background.

“He never has. But he said that he might send me to the Knight Academy and I’m a little scared.”

That was a lie. It didn’t really scare me, it just sounded like a real pain. My real aim was to get to know this soldier a little through conversation so that he might stand up for me if Rakunu ever wanted me killed.

“Oh, the Knight Academy... Wow, yeah...” The young knight suddenly looked down at his feet, seeming at a loss for words.

What’s with that reaction?

“Oh, man... I wish I was still there...” He let out an emotional sigh, as if to say, *Those were the days.*

I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. *Is his life really that much worse now?*

“You really liked the academy?”

“Oh, you’ll understand once you go to the royal capital, kid. The royal capital’s nothing like this place... See, this here’s the middle of nowhere.”

“Kid”? Did he mean me? He sounded like a Tokyo University graduate who’d gotten a job back home and pined for his student days in the big city.

“Is it really that exciting?”

“Oh, it’s exciting all right. All the boys were together from the moment we woke up, and the good times didn’t stop till night. And there’s real fun to be had just outside the academy... You gotta enjoy your youth while you can.”

Life at the Knight Academy must have suited him well. I couldn’t imagine it because even my days as a university student in Tokyo—supposedly the best days of my life—had been dull. He would probably be the type who’d fit right in with his friend group and start having fun the moment he arrived at university.

To someone like him, my life must have looked like a boring waste of precious time. Looking back, I couldn’t remember a single time when my life had been full of excitement like his. I didn’t consider myself unlucky—everyone was different, after all—though it did make me a little sad.

“Would you mind telling me more about it?”

“Sure thing.”

With a little encouragement, the young man began talking with a distant gaze. His nostalgia trip continued for a while.

“...And this guy, Gallad, he was a real moron. Heh heh. So they rob him of everything—even the clothes on his back—after he gets drunk and falls asleep

by the roadside. Then, the next day, he sneaks back into the dorm and shows up to the lecture saying he hasn't got a uniform. That caused a real uproar, ha ha... It's funny just thinking about it."

Sounds fun...I guess.

I'd learned that he'd graduated two years earlier and had been working indoors ever since. He was too young to go off to battles like the one that had killed Gok, so he was left behind defending his home territory. That was convenient, because it meant he knew nothing of what had happened on the battlefield when Rakunu returned. In fact, that was probably why he'd been selected as one of Rakunu's personal guards.

The soldier's current post was basically a babysitting job watching over a bad-tempered old man. It was a great letdown.

"Speaking of Gallad—"

Just then, the door to the room burst open. A demon had come forth to drag him back to the cruel world of the present.

"You..." It was Rakunu.

"Lord Rakunu! Sir!" The man leaped to his feet, straightened his back, and gave a salute.

I also stood up and bowed my head low repeatedly.

"The hell are you doing?" Rakunu demanded.

"Watching the boy..."

"That's not how it looks to me."

The soldier had been sitting on the sofa opposite me. In the quiet of the night, his voice must have been audible from outside.

Should I stand up for him since he's been good to me? No, it's better to keep quiet for now. I hate to do it to him, but I've got big problems of my own, and that's putting it mildly.

"I'm...s-sorry... I forgot myself..." The young knight began apologizing.

I also continued bowing my head like a little kid whose parents had just

caught him up to no good.

“I’ll decide your punishment later. Now get out!” Rakunu yelled.

The young soldier stiffened like a current of electricity had run through him. After giving Rakunu a quick salute, he hurried out of the room. Once he’d closed the door behind him, I was left alone with Rakunu.

Rakunu looked at me. He made no attempt to be polite.

“State your business, boy.”

First I’m “kid” and now I’m “boy”? At least no one’s calling me “brat.”

“M-M-My dad asked me to give you a message, sir, please.”

I deliberately made my attempts to be respectful sound clumsy. I wasn’t an actor, and this was by no means a great performance, but I was convincing enough. Normally, I’d slip into talking like an adult, but that wouldn’t do here. He had to think I was no threat—that I was barely worth his attention.

“Then let’s hear it.”

“H-He wants to tell you a s-secret. A secret between him and L-Lady Satsuki.”

“Why didn’t he come himself?”

Fair question, to be honest.

“P-People are w-watching him.”

This was true. Three soldiers had been assigned to Rook for his personal protection.

“Hm... Does the secret relate to the will?”

I had a bite.

“W-Well, it’s...”

Doing my best to act nervous, I hastily stood up from the sofa and then approached the crackling hearth.

“Please watch,” I said.

I took a single sheet of parchment from my pocket and showed it to Rakunu in the light of the hearth. As I held it closer to the flames, a pattern of black lines

eventually began to appear on its surface. I'd coated it with a highly flammable substance designed to burn black before the parchment could catch fire—a form of invisible ink, in other words. A pattern formed, revealing the areas where the substance had been applied. A charred impression of the Ho family's intricate crest gradually appeared upon the previously blank sheet.

"Do you see it?" I asked while showing it to Rakunu. When he didn't respond, I said, "Maybe it's not dark enough."

To demonstrate, I leaned the parchment even further into the hearth. But I got too close.

"Ouch!"

The heat of the flames made me instinctively pull back my hand. The parchment fell into the hearth and burned up.

"Ah... I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." I apologized, bowing like a servant being chastised for their clumsiness.

"It's fine. Tell me what it was."

"Well..." I began. I produced another sheet from my pocket—a scrap piece of parchment, like something an errand boy might use for taking notes. I began reading it as I spoke. "I think Uncle Gok's will was written on a piece like the one I just showed you."

"Show me what you've got written there."

"Oh. Yes, sir."

I hurried over to Rakunu, who was standing by the sofa, and handed my notes to him. The notes listed the following: "take the witch's parchment," "my arrangements won't change," "find Salun's will," and "keep the folded part facing up at the top right."

Rakunu frowned as he tried to make sense of it. "And why would Rook tell me all this?"

"My dad doesn't want to be in charge! He's not right for the job. I'm just a farmer like him... Satsuki's orders are bad for both of us."

"Hah! So he sent his son to tell me?"

Fortunately, my words aligned with Rakunu's way of thinking.

"Yes... And he made me come alone." I acted as though I was angry with Rook.

"And?"

"I've g-got another sheet that we stole from S-Satsuki when she showed them to us. I'll give it to you if, umm..."

I kept sneaking glances at the notes crumpled in Rakunu's hand as I spoke. Rakunu realized where I was looking, smoothed out the crumpled notes, and read them again.

"If I agree that Rook's living arrangements won't change?"

"Y-Yes."

"I see. You have my word."

Success. I made him promise.

"W-Well... Here it is."

Like a child in a rush to complete an errand given by their parents, I went quiet as I hastily placed another piece of parchment into his hand.

"Um, the folded part..." I mumbled.

"Keep the folded corner facing up. Like this?" Rakunu struck the parchment's surface with his finger.

"Yes. You need to write on it with that part facing you."

The top right corner of the parchment was folded to ensure no one would accidentally write on the surface that was already covered with invisible ink.

"C-Can I be excused now?"

"Go. And give my regards to Rook."

I won't breathe a word to him.

"I can leave by myself. Thank you." I bowed my head low to Rakunu before hurrying out of the room.

Wow, that was exhausting. I felt more tired than I had in twenty years.

I nodded to the guards on the way out and headed back to my room. I'd planned to go straight to bed, but when I got there, I was met with Rook sitting on a chair and looking at me sternly.

"Oh, dad, you're awake."

"You think I can sleep without knowing where my son is?"

Well, I guess not.

"Where were you?"

"I was just checking out the library..."

"Don't lie to me."

Uh-oh. I've been caught.

"Did you forget that I grew up in this house? I know every inch of it, and I've looked everywhere."

Rook wasn't too furious with me, so he probably hadn't guessed that I'd been with Rakunu.

I briefly considered lying by saying I'd been playing with Sham, but I stopped myself. "I'm sorry. I had things to do. I was preparing for tomorrow..."

"Didn't I tell you that I'd protect this family? Do you really have so little faith in me?"

"It's not like that..."

I considered Rook an incredible father, and he always commanded my respect, but there was no denying that he wasn't cut out for this situation. Rook had no talent for politics, and he was a lousy actor. Everyone had their strengths and weaknesses, and right now he was like a fish out of water.

"I just thought that I'd try to help out..."

The truth was that I didn't have faith in Rook in this situation. That was the whole reason I was doing things alone.

"You're just a boy. You don't have to do anything. Do you know how worried I was?"

"I'm sorry."

He was bound to worry. Imagine your son disappearing at a time like this.

"I know how capable you are, Yuri. Perhaps you did find a way to help. But to me and your mom, your life's worth more than our own and certainly more than any ranch. Try to understand that."

Uh... It's hard to argue when he talks like that.

"Yes, dad."

"Now stop doing dangerous things. Will you promise me?"

"I promise."

Is that a promise I can keep? I'm not sure.

"Now get to bed. We have a busy day ahead."

"Yes, dad."

I gave him a little bow of my head before quickly changing into my nightclothes and hopping into bed.

I'd kept my fingertips hidden the whole time, so he never saw the blisters I'd gotten from burning them on the hearth. We couldn't sterilize them, and I didn't want any crude medical treatment. It was best to leave it. I thought the stinging pain would torment me, but I was surprisingly sleepy.

Perhaps it had been a tense time for me too.



The council resumed the following afternoon after a short delay, with Satsuki beginning the proceedings.

"Everyone, regardless of what happens, we will choose the next head of the Ho family with a vote today. Do not forget your honor as knights as you cast your votes."

Sounds like this ends today, for better or worse.

"I believe that Rakunu and I exhausted our arguments yesterday."

Pretty much. You two were at each other's throats and going round in circles

for three hours.

“Today we will begin by verifying the authenticity of each will. A means exists for determining the genuine article.”

The many lords in the room looked stunned by Satsuki’s claim. Their faces said, *If there’s a way to do that, then why subject us to that argument over it yesterday?*

“For generations, the Ho family has taken measures to prepare for a situation in which a fake will is presented to us. I must apologize for keeping it a secret until now. A will written by a head of the Ho family will reveal the family crest when held near a flame,” Satsuki continued.

Rakunu didn’t try to silence her.

“Salun Ho—Gok’s father and my father-in-law—was the head of family prior to Gok, and he left us this will. Many of those who were present at the council that chose my husband as his successor are also here today. The reason I did not inspect my husband’s will yesterday was because I was unsure where to find this old will within our archives.”

Come to think of it, would invisible ink even work after being stored for decades? I wonder. There’s a chance that microbes would break it down to the point of ineffectiveness.

“If I had revealed this yesterday, Rakunu would have denied the existence of such a technique along with other such objections. But now that this will is here before us, he cannot possibly deny it.”

“Go ahead and show us,” Rakunu said confidently. I’d revealed the whole plot to him the night before, after all.

“Indeed, we can begin the test right now. This won’t take long.”

The center of the table at which the lords had been sitting was the closest part to the hearth. A space was cleared so that the three sheets of parchment could be placed, face down, on a piece of cloth. Then long, semi-cylindrical wooden rods were placed at the top and bottom of the three wills so the sheets lay between them. The will left by Salun was made of extremely old parchment that had visibly started to discolor.

“Now, let’s begin. Rakunu, can you confirm that this is the actual will that you brought to us?”

“I’m sure of it. Now get on with it.” Rakunu was full of confidence—he didn’t have the slightest doubt that he’d be proven right.

At least try to pretend that you didn’t know about the invisible ink, I wanted to say to him. Even if Gok had given him the real will, he still should’ve been a little surprised to learn about this trick. He probably just hated to lose an argument—he couldn’t even feign a little surprise because he didn’t want to give Satsuki the satisfaction.

“In the interest of fairness, I’d like our head chef to perform the test. He’s accustomed to handling hot objects, making him the ideal for the role,” Satsuki continued.

“I don’t understand much of this, but I’m at your service,” the confused and sullen chef obliged.

His attitude made his thoughts clear: *I’m here to prepare your food. Why’d you suddenly call on me to deal with this? I don’t see how it’s any of my business.* As the only person wearing an apron, he looked out of place here. He also wore thick oven mitts on both hands—the same type he used in his work.

Satsuki was right to say he was perfect for the task.

“I should take the rod there and slide it along these pieces of wood so it’s just above the parchments? As if I’m trying to roast them?” the chef asked.

“That’s right. Please go ahead.”

“Very well.”

With a mittened hand, the chef gripped an iron rod resting in the burning hearth and used a rag he held in his other hand to wipe the rod clean of soot. Although a fire was going, the firewood didn’t produce enough heat to make the rod red hot.

He placed the rod down so that it formed a bridge across the two semi-cylindrical pieces of wood and slowly slid it from one end to the other.

“Oh?!” Rakunu gasped. I watched Rakunu’s face closely—for the first time, his

eyes were wide with surprise.

“Huh...” Rook, who was unaware of the plan, also made a small noise in alarm.

“What does it mean...?” One of the lords muttered as the others whispered among themselves.

Nothing was happening to Salun’s will. As the moisture left the surface of the flame-resistant parchment, it merely curled up a little like a piece of squid. Next was Satsuki’s will, which likewise didn’t change. Its rear surface remained blank as the heated rod moved to Rakunu’s will.

Rakunu’s reaction had more or less confirmed that the plan was a success, but I was still nervous as could be.

The moment the rod approached Rakunu’s will, a black pattern began to surface. First to appear was the outer edge of the circular Ho Family crest. The center of the crest, however, remained empty, save for the word “FAKE.”

“This can’t be!” Rakunu cried, flustered like a criminal who’d been caught red-handed.

After I’d left the night before, he’d dispatched a plainrunner to his counterfeiter to have an identical fake will made using the parchment I’d given him. And earlier today, Satsuki had watched Rakunu’s room before starting the council. That was where she’d spotted someone alight on a kingeagle and enter his room. In his great haste, he’d dug his own grave.

With the stage all set, everything was sure to go in our favor. The crux of the argument had been the veracity of the wills. Now that that matter had been cleared up, no one would want someone guilty of producing a forgery to become head of family.

“Looks like we’ve smoked out your forgery,” Satsuki quipped. The grim look on her face had turned into a look of triumph now that she was assured of victory.

“You tricked me...you little shit,” Rakunu growled, glowering at me.

“Yes, I suppose I did,” I replied.

I was indeed guilty of giving him the piece of parchment.

I'd better take this chance to explain what's going on.

Rakunu, Satsuki, and I understood the situation, but everyone else here was clueless. *Satsuki lied to us? Did she have a good reason? Or were we tricked?* These were no doubt the questions on their minds.

"I was lying last night when I said that my father and I planned to betray Satsuki. It wasn't clear whether your will was real or fake, so we duped you into creating another one using some fake parchment I'd prepared beforehand."

Instead of attending the rest of the council the day before, I'd made the invisible ink mixture in the kitchen. The chef that was here now had helped me with it.

Invisible ink was normally painted on with a brush, but it was also capable of producing detailed lines. I'd borrowed the Ho Family crest's stamp from Satsuki—the largest one they had—and applied the ink onto just its edges before pressing it onto the parchment. Then, I'd written "FAKE" in the center with a brush. Lastly, I'd painted the solution across the entire stamp and used it on another piece of parchment—that was one I'd burned in the hearth in front of Rakunu.

"Grr... Ngghh..." Rakunu grumbled, his face turning crimson with rage.

Not even he could argue his way out of this. Judging from how red he was as he glared at me, I guessed he was too overcome with emotion to be capable of much rational thought.

"Don't you have anything to say? You could apologize to my uncle Gok for starters," I taunted him. I wouldn't normally behave like this, but I figured it'd be for the best if I acted like an actual child at least a little.

"No! It's not fake! They replaced it with another one!"

"No, you brought it to us yourself. No one else touched it; everyone here saw that."

"Someone broke into my room last night and stole it! It must have been altered before I got it back!"

He sure knows how to think on his feet.

“If you knew someone had taken it, then why didn’t you mention that before the test? You didn’t have anything to say about this supposed theft then. In fact, you sounded quite confident that it was the will you’d brought to us when Satsuki asked you. Honestly, it sounds like something you just made up.”

He was only mentioning things that worked in his favor while trying to gloss over everything else. That wasn’t going to fly here.

“Gr... You little shit!” Rakunu gnashed his teeth.

“This ‘little shit’ just had you dancing in the palm of his hand. I’d hate to think what would become of the Ho family if the next head is tricked that easily,” I retorted.

No reason not to rile him up a little. He looks bad because I’m just a kid.

“You’ll regret this. I won’t forget you, you despicable brat!”

Now he’s real mad. If looks could kill, I’d be six feet under right now. I feel a little guilty, but I can’t be blamed for his personality.

The reason he fled in the face of the enemy wasn’t because he was scared of dying—he was plotting to claim Gok’s position the moment he thought Gok was going to die in a desperate attack.

No one captured by Kulati soldiers ever came back from the battlefield alive. Anyone who was taken prisoner became a slave, or—if they couldn’t be taken away—they were executed instead. If Gok’s attack had failed, the remaining troops in the fortress would have all been killed or enslaved, and no one would have ever known that Rakunu had fled in the face of the enemy. Without anyone to accuse him of deserting, there was nothing to stop him from using his influence as a powerful noble to secure the headship for himself.

Even the will that Satsuki brought to us might’ve never made it back from the battlefield.

But Gok’s attack had been successful. That must have been an unexpected piece of terrible news for Rakunu. He might’ve been able to deal with a handful of survivors from the fortress, but almost every single soldier had made it back.

That made it impossible for him to deny the circumstances of his desertion. Fleeing in the face of the enemy was a serious offense that would lead to his execution if he was found guilty.

There was no backing down from his situation. That was why he doubled down on his plan and tried to overpower Satsuki. He was even willing to threaten the lords in order to win their votes.

I might've been willing to look the other way if he'd fled out of fear of participating in a suicide attack, but someone who was clearly capable of such a despicable plot was more than likely to make an attempt on Rook's life. I would've gladly let him win if this was an ordinary election, but I couldn't let trash like him have his way.

It was a horrible situation. Now no one was happy. With this, I'd have to attend the Knight Academy, and Rook wouldn't be able to dedicate himself to the ranch. And while Rook was at least educated enough to handle this outcome, I had no idea what would become of Suzuya. If anyone had benefited from all this, it was Satsuki.

How will we get through this? My head hurts.

"Now then!" Satsuki said, all smiles as she clapped her hands to get everyone's attention. She was clearly pleased to see everything go to plan.

"It seems you have nothing further to say, Rakunu, so I suggest we begin the vote. Do you accept?"

"I will be heard! This is a plot against me!" he protested.

Of course he'd say that.

"Anyone who believes Rakunu to be an appropriate head of family is free to cast their vote for him. But first, I have something to say—rather than accepting a noble death befitting one of my husband's knights, Rakunu seized the opportunity to flee. Not only that, he also desecrated my husband's dying wish when he produced a fake will. That was an unforgivable act. While no one here can be blamed for having been fooled before we were able to ascertain the will's veracity, anyone who'd side with him now that his forgery has been exposed will be recognized as a scoundrel. And it will, of course, be evidence

that you are unworthy of knighthood. Think carefully on that point before you cast your vote,” Satsuki warned.

She wasn’t giving Rakunu time to argue with her. That was smart.

“Absolute drive! She lies to—”

“Very well. Then explain yourself now. Is that what you want?” Satsuki declared suddenly.

“Grrr.”

Rakunu was lost for words. He’d made plenty of loud objections, but in the end, he had no further excuses beyond the ones he’d already given me.

“Well then—”

“Wait!” he cried.

As expected, Rakunu wanted to delay the vote. He had to be able to feel the room turning against him. His tricks had worked for him up to this point, so he couldn’t be completely naive.

“I, uh... This...” he stuttered. He tried to speak, but it was as though his thoughts were too disordered to be turned into sentences.

Satsuki kept her mouth closed as he fumbled for words. She wanted everyone to witness his pathetic attempts to explain himself. No one else spoke a word either.

It seemed Rakunu was desperately trying not to lose the opportunity to speak as he opened and closed his mouth, filling the silence with groaning sounds. Eventually, he bellowed, “I’m...!”

What’s his story gonna be now?

“I’m worthy of the headship! Especially more so than a youngster without so much as a knighthood! Think for a moment. You’d appoint a man who isn’t even a knight himself as the head of a chieftain family—as the leader of your knights!”

So that’s his new line of attack? He’s not completely stupid after all.

“That’s—” Rook started.

“Rook. Let Rakunu speak,” Satsuki’s piercing voice silenced him.

Whatever Rook said here would just serve as fuel for a lengthy counterargument from Rakunu. Now that his forgery had been exposed, Rakunu’s position had gone from the most powerful man in the province to a crook who made counterfeit wills. Words could lose all of their power depending on who spoke them. Unlike the day before, Rakunu would have to do more than criticize Rook to make himself look worthy of headship.

“Well? Do go on,” Satsuki said.

“Grr...”

“What’s wrong? If you’re finished, then I’d like to continue the proceedings.”

Satsuki may have learned from her mistakes the previous evening and reconsidered her approach. Rakunu only had something to say when there was someone to argue with. Otherwise, all he had were cheap insults. An argument over the validity of each of Rakunu’s insults against Rook would be exactly what he wanted. That would lead to Rook’s qualifications being the subject of the debate.

“I... I got here through my brave deeds, ever since the crusade before last! Since two generations ago...”

“The lords in attendance here are well aware of such things. Now let us hold the vote.”

“W-Wait!” He must have felt how heavily the odds were stacked against him.

“We can wait two more minutes,” Satsuki said. “If you think of nothing to say, we’ll begin the vote.”

In the end, Rakunu made two more statements, but then he was all out of arguments.



With everything cleared off the table and the room back in order, Satsuki declared, “Now we will begin the vote. Those in favor of Rook Ho, younger brother of Gok Ho, as the next head of the Ho Family, please raise your hand.”

Do I get to vote too? I raised my hand just in case.

Every hand was raised. No one wanted to show hesitation. Some of these were people who'd once been sympathetic toward Rakunu.

On the opposite side of the adjoined tables, Rakunu looked aghast, like a man who'd been abandoned by the world itself.

"Now those in favor of Rakunu Ek, please raise your hand."

Every hand shot down; none were raised.

A guard who'd been summoned by Satsuki earlier waited behind Rakunu.

"Arrest this traitor," Satsuki declared.

Now that it was certain his will was a forgery, he could be arrested for the crime. Anything less would spell trouble later.

At Satsuki's command, the guard grabbed Rakunu's shoulder. "This way, Sir Rakunu."

But Rakunu didn't respond. He didn't even budge when the guard touched him. He kept his eyes closed and stiffened up. The atmosphere was tense—it looked like he was going to be difficult.

The guard became impatient. "Sir Rakunu!" he yelled.

Rakunu's reaction was instantaneous. He brushed the guard's hand off his shoulder, and in the same movement, pulled something from his pocket that he then swept across the guard's throat.

"Wha—?!" Another guard stationed some distance away blurted out.

He thrust his spear at Rakunu before the blood even had time to erupt from the first guard's neck, but Rakunu was ready for him. As he'd cut the first guard's throat, he'd bent his legs and turned his body sideways, enabling him to dodge the spear at the last second.

"Nh!"

The guard had attempted to strike Rakunu with his spear as he drew it back, but Rakunu simply cut through the shaft with his billhook as if he were hacking a branch from a tree. Without a pause, Rakunu sliced the hand that held the spear. Then, he effortlessly opened the guard's throat before the man could

recover from the shock of having his hand injured.

I watched this play out before my eyes, but none of it felt real. Two people had died in a matter of seconds. They'd been murdered.

The guard fell to the ground with his half-severed head at an unnatural angle. Bright crimson blood gushed from his open neck like a fountain and splattered across the white tablecloth.

"Yuri! Get back. You too, Satsuki!" Rook called out. His voice was incredibly calm and reassuring.

With Rakunu between us and the door, we had nowhere to run. As Rook spoke, Rakunu, his eyes wide with rage, charged toward us.

The lords remained seated. No one appeared willing to give their life to defend Satsuki.

"Out of my way!" Rakunu yelled as he charged at Rook.

Rook faced Rakunu and formed a wall that kept him away from me and Satsuki. He crouched slightly with his arms crossed in and held out in front of him, and he also appeared to be hunched over at a glance. It was an odd stance, but it also seemed well honed.

The short blade that had just killed two men now approached Rook.

"Hah." Rook let out a small breath and drew back slightly as the short blade shot toward his abdomen.

Meanwhile, his right hand followed the blade and approached it from the side. Rook didn't appear to think at all. It was as if he'd trained so much that these movements were now instinctive to him. When the base of Rook's thumb reached Rakunu's wrist, Rakunu suddenly halted his attack and moved his whole body back to keep his arm away.

"You bastard." Rakunu glowered at Rook.

Whatever Rook had just done, it was incredibly effective.

Rakunu looked toward the exit. The room was now in turmoil and, although no one openly attempted to suppress Rakunu, several of the lords had run outside. Satsuki had a greater number of guards under her command, so help

would soon arrive. Rakunu must have foreseen this, because he thrust his blade at Rook once more without delay.

But his attack never reached Rook. My dad's hands formed a defense that Rakunu found impenetrable.

It looked to me as though Rook was trying to grab Rakunu's wrist so that he could pull the assailant toward him without letting the blade come too close. Rakunu, however, wanted to keep his distance, so he withdrew whenever he sensed his wrist was about to be captured. The reason was beyond me, but the two of them appeared to share a mutual understanding that Rakunu's blade would become useless if Rook was to successfully grip Rakunu's wrist.

Even so, Rook was walking a narrow tightrope.

Rakunu made repeated attempts over the course of five seconds or so before realizing that it wasn't working. He tried to approach once more, this time using his empty left arm as a shield over the right hand that held the billhook.

If they got close enough to grapple each other, Rakunu could win by simply burying the blade into Rook's flesh, which may have made him feel like he'd have the advantage.

But Rook calmly stepped back to maintain his distance, avoided Rakunu's makeshift shield arm, and then dodged the blade as it was thrust forward. This time, Rook's palm followed the other man's weapon-bearing fist.

I'd initially taken Rook's movements for a simple parry, but there was more to it—Rook had directed the blade away from his abdomen, and in the process, he'd given the attack more momentum. Rakunu's weapon thrust into the backrest of the chair Rook had been sitting on.

Rook must have understood that the blade would cut through the chair's stuffed backrest before the events had even happened, because—without a hint of hesitation—Rook aimed a powerful kick at the chair's legs. The principle of leverage led to the billhook twisting out of Rakunu's grip.

Rakunu moved to retrieve the blade that was now embedded in the chair—his haste must have led to poor decision-making.

Rook waited for a moment instead of stopping Rakunu. It was as though he'd

broken the rhythm of the fight. Rook didn't act until Rakunu had turned enough to reveal his shoulder, exposed and defenseless. In a series of rapid movements, he grabbed Rakunu from behind and captured his neck within his arm. At the same time, Rook kicked the chair and sent the weapon flying out of reach. The scuffle ended with Rakunu in a stranglehold as Rook's elbow joint gripped his throat.

All of this had taken place in a span of less than ten seconds.

The crushing pressure against Rakunu's carotid artery drained him of his strength and left him limp within seconds.

"Phew..."

Once Rakunu was completely unconscious, Rook released the other man with a sigh—the same one he used whenever he'd finished a daily chore on the ranch.

"You all right, Yuri?" he asked.

"I'm fine... But I didn't know you were so strong, dad."

I was stunned. It was the first time I'd witnessed an act of bravery from my dad. I'd always assumed he could fight since he'd attended a school for soldiers in the past, but I never thought he was capable of something like *this*. *He really is incredible.*

"Rook is such an adept fighter that he once participated in the Knight Academy Combat Tournament," Satsuki explained. "And it appears he hasn't neglected his training."

No, no, no, no, no. He never trains at all. Sure, he keeps in shape with all the manual labor on the ranch, but he's never practiced martial arts even once. I'm sure of it.

"Uh, yeah... I'm just glad that a few of my old skills still come in handy every now and then," Rook mumbled.

Your old skills...? He sounds like he took a few kendo classes in high school, but this is something else. Now I'm really curious about why he gave up on becoming a knight.

Interlude — The Night following the Turmoil

I

Now that the curtain had fallen on the series of tumultuous happenings, the attendees returned to their allotted rooms.

For a while, the corridors were noisy with the sounds of busy people running back and forth. There were many tasks that kept the manor busy—the guards' corpses had to be moved, the area needed to be cleaned, and everyone who'd been splattered with blood needed a fresh set of clothes.

I was fine, but Rook's clothing had gotten dirty while he'd fought Rakunu. So while Rook himself was unharmed, the maids insisted that he put on a new outfit.

The hustle and bustle died down as the night grew late, which suggested that most of the urgent tasks had been taken care of for now.

Rook and I had nothing in particular to do at that time, so we simply sat at a table and relaxed. Rook had a glass filled with alcohol in front of him. Rather than the clear glass you'd commonly find in Japan, the cup was made from a cloudy blue glass. It'd been designed in a way that made its translucence seem intentional, and the effect was actually quite beautiful.

"Dad, did you learn to fight like that at the Knight Academy?" I asked.

"That's right," he replied.

This was confirmation that the Knight Academy had taught him his combat skills. I'd assumed that the school was for pampered little noble kids who merely swung some wooden swords around and called it training, but I clearly needed to rethink that.

It's going to be tough training, isn't it? What if it's the sort of place where someone gets killed every few weeks?

"Do you wish you could fight like that, Yuri?"

I'd be lying if I said I didn't.

"A little."

"A little? So not a lot?"

"It would be nice if I could do it, but I'd need to think about it if training means ten or twenty years of blood, sweat, and tears."

I couldn't do it anyway. I'm terrible at sports.

"It's not so tough. Once you've grown a little, it'll only take about five years of hard work before you'll be able to fight like me."

Wait, only about five years...?

"Would it involve running from morning until night?"

"No, just half a day. Exercise sessions at the academy rarely go on beyond high noon."

Half a day? Can I handle that?

The no-lifer in me already felt sick at the thought. Then again, I was already used to a half-day's worth of manual labor—I often helped Rook on the ranch. But at the academy, I might be accompanied by Gunnery Sergeant Hartman and a bunch of spoiled noble brats rather than my dependable dad. I didn't like the thought of that.

Though if the soldier I'd talked to the day before was anything to go by, the academy wasn't all that bad.

We heard a knock at the door.

"May I enter?" a voice on the other side asked.

"Please come in," Rook said.

A maid entered the room.

"Pardon me, but I'd like to discuss your dinner arrangements."

"I'll have whatever you've got. Just bring it here."

Rook wasn't fussy when it came to food. Whenever Suzuya gave him a few options for dinnertime, his response was always "I'll have whatever." She'd

always say, “If you don’t give me a proper answer, that just makes it harder.” They never changed.

Will I ever get to hear them talk like that again now that Rook’s the head of family?

“Lady Satsuki is offering you an invitation to dine with her,” the maid said.

Initially, Rook gave no response—he merely looked away, displeasure evident on his face. *I’ve had a long day. I just wanna eat a pizza and enjoy a drink with a little dried squid*, I imagined him thinking.

“Fine, I’ll accept. Let me know when it’s ready,” he eventually said.

“Preparations have already been made. Please follow me.”

She’s already set for us?

We followed after the maid, and she led us to what looked like the head’s personal quarters.

Of all the rooms in this manor, this had to be the most modest I’d seen so far. There were none of the extravagant furnishings, gilded window frames, or elaborate papered walls that flaunted the family’s power elsewhere. But even this commonplace, simple furniture had all been carefully made, and everything shone beautifully with the luster of varnish. The mortar had been applied evenly to the walls, and there wasn’t a single stain in sight. The room managed to be extravagant without actually feeling that way.

Satsuki and Sham were already seated at the large table. It looked big enough to accommodate six people, but there were currently four green place mats laid out.

“Please sit wherever you’d like,” Satsuki said to us.

We did just that, though I guessed that my rightful place was opposite Sham.



“I owe you my gratitude for saving us from a rather dangerous situation.” Satsuki smiled as she thanked us in a formal tone.

“Oh, that was nothing.” Rook wasn’t the least bit boastful.

You could stand to brag a little. Rakunu could've easily killed everyone in that room.

"Are you quite sure you hate combat? It was all eighteen years ago now."

Eighteen years?

Rook's clean-shaven face made him look like he was in his twenties, but he was actually thirty-eight. Simply subtracting eighteen without worrying about when his birthday was exactly would've put him at twenty back then.

"Yes, I hate it. That's why I chose to take on debt and create the ranch so I could start a new life. But now..."

As I'd thought, this wasn't an easy choice for Rook.

He wasn't the type to enthusiastically embrace the challenge and declare, "I'm ready to do what's needed of me." He wasn't overcome with despair, but he certainly didn't like what was happening.

"I understand. Do you still intend to send Yuri to the Knight Academy?"

"Yes. But if he decides he doesn't like it, I won't stop him from quitting."

He's mentioned entering me into the Knight Academy in the past too. Looks like it's not up to me in any case.

"I don't want to force anyone into anything. If Yuri truly wishes to quit, I wouldn't object. But I don't expect that'll happen," Satsuki added as her gaze fell on me.

I'm not so sure...

"I wasn't lying when I said you can continue to manage your ranch," Satsuki told Rook.

"But wouldn't you be left to manage the head household?" Rook asked her. "I can't make you do that."

He sounded genuinely concerned. I suspected that leaving a widow to conduct all of the family business wasn't completely unheard of, but it would be frowned upon.

"It won't be a problem. I can work behind the scenes, and there are plenty of

old men here with nothing but spare time.”

Apparently, she planned to employ the retired old folk.

“But I’m sure there’ll be those who’ll try to steal from the family if I’m left in charge. When it happens, I’ll let you know discreetly, and then I’ll count on you to write them a little letter,” she said with a smile.

I guess she means that kind of letter that says, “Your misdeeds have come to light. Commit seppuku to restore your honor.”

“I can certainly do that much...” Unsurprisingly, Rook didn’t sound enthusiastic.

“Oh, here comes the food.”

Our meal was carried in.

There sure is a lot of variety.

There was cheese wrapped in thinly sliced smoked salmon; rolled omelets packed with some unknown meat; fruit wrapped in cured ham; and various other sorts of bite-size dishes all on one plate.

Must be the appetizer. As much as I enjoy Suzuya’s cooking, this is nice once in a while.

“Thank you for sharing your food with us,” I said politely.

“Go ahead and start eating,” Satsuki urged us.

I tried one dish after another and found them all delicious. *Did that chef with the oven mitts make all this? He’s not bad.*

I looked at Rook and saw him drink the aperitif put before him and eat the appetizers like they were bar snacks. He looked happy, though he was probably more pleased by the good alcohol than any of the food. It smelled stronger and sweeter than the usual whiskey he drank back home—it might’ve been brandy.

I looked over at Satsuki.

“Make sure you eat up,” she said with a smile.

She acts like she’s my aunt. Oh, wait—she is my aunt.

“Thank you, Satsuki. I’ll make sure I get my fill.” I still couldn’t help but feel a little awkward.

There were six courses brought out in total, starting with the appetizers and ending with dessert. My stomach was full by the time we’d finished eating.

Only then did Sham, who’d been looking strangely nervous on the other side of the table, speak for the first time that day. “U-Um! Will you look at the stars with me?!”

Stars? I glanced outside and saw the sky through the branches of the trees. It was a beautifully clear and starry night—perfect for stargazing.

I looked back at Rook, and for some reason, he was grinning at me.

He must imagine Sham’s some precocious kid asking the boy of her dreams out on a romantic date, but I doubt that’s the case. She probably studies the stars like a professional astronomer.

“Will you? Or are you not interested?” Sham asked.

Although a lot had happened that day, she seemed entirely detached from it all. Satsuki probably hadn’t told her anything. It was a strange arrangement; despite being deeply involved in all the problems we’d faced, she was completely out of the loop. Meanwhile, guests like Rook and I knew everything.

“Would you be all right with that, dad?”

I was a little curious about the stars. Most of what I knew came from a few introductory books on astronomy—mostly Japanese pop-science books—but even a novice could learn a lot about a planet from its stars.

“Yes, you go with her. I’m sure I don’t need to say it, but don’t leave the manor.”

“I won’t. See you later.”

Sham and I both left the room.

“This way. There’s a good viewing area.”

I grabbed a thick outdoor jacket and followed Sham. She happily led the way, and we ascended two flights of stairs and a ladder to reach the roof.

The manor's roof formed a tall slope, but there was one area—three and a half square meters in size and designed like a watchtower—that seemed to sit at the manor's peak. That was where we emerged.

From here we could see the city of Kalakumo in its entirety. There was nothing above us. It initially seemed odd to me that a watchtower would have no shelter from the rain, but I realized it was probably out of consideration for kingeagles. A roof above our heads would've created a blind spot.

Fortunately, the lack of a roof also made it a perfect place for stargazing.

There was a hole in the floor that we'd just climbed out of. There was some sort of fabric—something that looked like the hide of a marine mammal—secured to the edges of the hatch's cover by rivets. I couldn't be sure, but I assumed it worked like a waterproof seal. There was also a railing of sorts to prevent us from falling.

"What do you think? This is my secret place."

I doubted it was a secret, but her proud, yet bashful smile looked cute on a girl her age.

"I have to warn you, I don't know much about stars," I told her honestly.

"Then I'll teach you," she replied.

Sham was supposedly a year younger than me. I never thought I'd see the day where I'd be schooled by a girl this young.

"There's a mat and blanket here so we can lie down."

Sham quickly laid the mat down and then put the blanket over it. She'd retrieved them from a supply box that must have been for the sentries out on duty. I lay down like she said and looked up at the sky.

Without a roof, there was nothing to block my view of the heavens. I realized that this was the first time since my reincarnation that I'd simply lain back and looked up at the night sky like this. Neither Rook nor Suzuya had ever shown any interest in the stars, and I lived on an orderly schedule with a child's bedtime. That meant I turned in early each night.

Astronomy was one of the oldest academic fields, and anyone with a healthy

pair of eyes had all they needed to begin studying if they had the stamina for it. A world without artificial satellites or automated observatories meant staying up late each night to view the stars.

“The sky looks great. It’s completely clear,” I remarked.

“Isn’t it?”

The night sky was a moving sight. My young pupils hadn’t succumbed to any effects of aging yet, so the sky was especially stunning to me. This was how beautiful the stars could look in a world that hadn’t yet encountered the concept of light pollution. That, and the low humidity of winter probably helped too.

Even on the clearest of nights, the stars I’d seen while living in Japan never looked so impressive. I’d learned about the Milky Way at school when I was a little kid, but I never really understood it. No matter how closely I’d looked at the sky, I’d never seen that particular cluster of bright stars.



But now it made sense to me—there clearly was a dense group of stars forming a belt across the sky. Those stars, arranged like a great river stopped in time, made me understand why ancient people had once described it as a river of milk. It was breathtaking.

The cluster of stars I was looking at belonged to the same galaxy as this planet, and each was one of our galactic companions. The galaxy was probably disc shaped, but it looked as though the stars were packed into a straight line since we were viewing it side-on.

Hold up—if we have our own Milky Way here, then this is part of a whole galaxy. Wow, a whole galaxy. Well, the people here do look human, so I guess I didn't get sent to a universe that's completely different from my last one.

“Hey, are you listening? That star's name is Milra,” Sham said.

“Milra?”

“The third body in orbit around our planet is known as Milra.”

Oh, okay.

There were too many stars to know which one she was pointing at. I hadn't the slightest idea which of them was the Milra she mentioned.

If it was in orbit around us, it should've been exceptionally large just like the moon, but all I could see were your standard twinkling stars.

“This star and five others are known as special stars. They don't move the same way as the others do.”

So, she was essentially telling me that there were six satellites in orbit around our planet. That wasn't impossible, but it was more likely that Sham understood space in terms of geocentrism—the belief everything revolved around our planet.

Nowadays on Earth, the layman's reaction to the geocentric model tended to be along the lines of, “How could anyone have misunderstood the universe *that* badly? Were they stupid?” However, I'd once read a pop-science book on astronomy that showed how the geocentric model adequately explained many of the movements of celestial bodies. In fact, for someone lacking an

understanding of elliptical orbits, the geocentric model often provided more logical explanations than the current heliocentric theory. Disproving geocentrism was surprisingly difficult.

“How do all the other stars move?” I asked her.

“They orbit around another star known as the stationary star.”

Ah, that must be a pole star.

“Do you know any constellations?” I asked.

“I do, but...”

I glanced at Sham beside me and noticed a bored expression.

“There are only five stars that are particularly important in astronomy. The others don’t really change.”

It looked like Sham had very little interest in constellations.

It was easy to imagine how stars in space would get a little boring without a big observatory telescope. Once in a while a supernova would cause new stars to appear and disappear, but otherwise they’d endlessly spin around and around at a constant speed, with a pole star always at the center. There couldn’t be a more boring topic of research.

Inferior and superior planets, on the other hand, moved in much more interesting ways than the stars.

“You won’t teach me?”

“Well, I suppose I’ll have to. Now, listen carefully...”

My humble approach made Sham feel proud of herself.

She’s easy to please. And that prideful expression of hers is kinda cute.

“First, the constellations can be divided into summer and winter constellations. What we see now are winter constellations.”

We’re starting with the basics? She’s like an elementary school teacher.

“And well, um, that’s the Bull.”

“I see...”

Unsurprisingly, I had no idea which one she meant. Simply pointing up at the sky with a finger was no way to indicate a specific constellation.

“That’s the Lyre, and that’s the Cat.”

“Wow...”

I wasn’t learning anything, but Sham was surprisingly cute, so I was okay with it.

I feel like I’ve turned into her dad. The thought made me smile. I’d always wanted a daughter like her. Save for one bad experience with a woman, there hadn’t been any others in my previous life, and that unpleasant experience had left me with something close to gynophobia.

“And that’s the Ladle.”

Okay...

I didn’t know what the Bull, Cat, or Lyre constellations were supposed to look like, but I could recognize a ladle shape. There were seven stars forming the ladle’s shape, and the outline stood out clearly because they shone brighter than the others around them.

It looks just like the Big Dipper. Uh...

I blinked several times, doubting my own eyes, and took another look at the Ladle constellation.

Huh?!

It looked exactly like the Big Dipper. No, it *was* the Big Dipper. For a moment, my mind went blank.

I shifted my gaze in search of other familiar constellations. I didn’t know them well at all—I couldn’t tell you what Cygnus looked like—but I recalled a few famous ones made of bright stars.

I soon found another. I could see so many other stars that it was difficult to make out, but I was certain that I’d found Orion.

Huh... But that shouldn’t exist. Can the stars look the same from another planet? I knew the answer without having to think. *Of course not. It’s*

impossible.

Constellations were made up of the light of stars and galaxies in space, or the residual light of a supernova as it reached the Earth's surface. When viewed from another position or distance, the stars that made up the constellations wouldn't remain clustered together in the same way. The three-dimensional nature of space meant that they'd become scattered further apart as you moved closer.

Calling it a space fingerprint or planetary DNA would be an odd analogy, but from other planets, the constellations could never look the same as they did on Earth. And if this was an entirely new universe, then absolutely everything should've been different.

There had to be some kind of explanation. I came up with several theories and tried to make them work. Once I'd eliminated the absurd, though, I was left with just one logical explanation: I was in roughly the same location as the Earth and in the same galaxy.



"...and that's the Monkey, and that's the Chair."

I came to my senses and realized that Sham was still talking.

"And...that's all of them. Have you memorized them?" Sham asked.

You expect me to remember all that? Anyhow, I've got bigger things on my mind.

"Sorry, I wasn't listening."

"Huh? Don't tell me you fell asleep?" She looked a little shocked.

Now I feel bad.

"No, it's just that now's not the time..."

"It isn't? But you're the one who asked to hear about them in the first place..."

She's got me there. She looks so disappointed.

"I'm really sorry, but can we end our stargazing for today?"

“Astronomy must be boring. It’s a shame because it’s interesting to me...” she said, growing unhappier by the second.

Ah, jeez. What do I say to her now?

“No, I like it too—it’s just that I think I’m about to make a big discovery.”

“I understand. You can explain your great discovery to me later.”

I’ll have to make this up to Sham at some point...

I dashed down the ladder and searched for a maid so that I could ask for directions to Satsuki’s room. Then I knocked on the door.

“Come in,” came the reply.

“Pardon me,” I said while entering.

“Oh, it’s you, Yuri. What’s wrong?”

“I was wondering if I could take a look at a map. Do we have one?”

“A map...?” Satsuki looked unsure for a moment. “Oh, I suppose you might never have seen one before.”

It wasn’t that I’d never seen a map, it was just that the ones back home were all rough sketches that a child could have drawn, and none of them showed anything beyond our kingdom. Those were no help.

“I’d like to see the biggest one you have.”

“The biggest... I believe it’s in the vault.”

“When I say the biggest, I don’t mean how big the parchment is—I mean the one that shows the widest area. I want to see the shape of the continent.”

“Don’t worry. It’s a map from the late days of the empire showing all of its territories.”

A map of the old Shantila Empire was impressive. It must have been a treasure.

She must have noticed my surprised expression because she explained further. “But of course, it’s not the original. It’s only a copy.”

A copy? That’s still good for my purposes.

The Shantila Empire had once controlled a vast territory that included what was now the Shiyalta Kingdom, and I'd heard that their civil engineering surpassed that of the Shiyalta Kingdom of the present. Some of the empire's construction techniques were still in widespread use after nine hundred years.

Kalakumo, the city I was currently in, had been constructed after the fall of the empire, so it wasn't a remnant of those times. The shoreline defenses and foundations of the castle on Royal Castle Island were said to have been built in the days of the empire, though. I had high expectations for a map made by the same people.

"Could you please show it to me?"

I let Satsuki guide me to a set of imposing doors reinforced with iron plates. This was the vault.

Satsuki set down the large key to the vault and headed deeper inside, lantern in hand.

A faint light revealed the many valuable items packed into the small space. They weren't the gold and silver treasures of a pirate's hoard. Most of it was weapons—swords and spears—as well as armor mounted on the walls. Their historical significance must've given them value.

But on closer inspection, I did see some gold bars too. They rested on top of a sturdy-looking shelf where they'd gathered a lot of dust. Nearby was a bright red object that looked like a piece of precious coral.

"Oh my, it's dusty in here," Satsuki noted as she held her handkerchief to her mouth.

"It really is."

The valuables gathered here were bound to stoke greed and other impure thoughts, so the manor's maids weren't sent in to clean the room each day.

"I seem to remember it being in here," Satsuki continued.

She opened a bureau made of a pale wood that might've been paulownia. Inside, there was a map made from a large piece of parchment that had been folded in two.

Parchment was made using animal hide, so there was a limit on the maximum size of one piece. This map was actually two large sheets that had been sewn together with fine thread. Once it was opened up and spread out, it was about the size of an open newspaper.

Although the outline of the landmass was terribly distorted, its shape was immediately familiar to me—it was the western region of the Eurasian continent. It must've been drawn largely based on third-party reports. This rendering of Eurasia was quite crude compared to the accurate maps I'd known in Japan, but it was still easily recognizable as the same landmass.

“Our kingdom is located in this region here.”

Satsuki pointed at a spot that corresponded to the Scandinavian Peninsula.

Much like Russia, the Shantila Empire had once been a vast expanse of territory, although much of it was the barely habitable regions in the far north. Judging by the borders drawn on the map, it had stretched from the Ural Mountains all the way to the Scandinavian Peninsula, and it'd gone down past Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula to the south—almost as far as the city of Baku.

The imperial capital of Shantinion appeared to be on the Crimean Peninsula. Unlike the Scandinavian Peninsula, which looked like a rough sketch, the map was incredibly well-drawn around the shores of the Black Sea. It matched my memories of world maps almost exactly. I could even see the Sea of Marmara connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. The map extended from that region to around the Italian Peninsula.

Great Britain, on the other hand, was drawn like a peanut, and Ireland wasn't even pictured. Either it didn't exist, or the mapmaker used information so vague that they hadn't known to include it. I had no way of knowing which.

“Our kingdom isn't depicted particularly well on this map. I believe the heart of the empire was in the far east in those days.”

“I see...”

So I was right about the peninsula being drawn inaccurately. This whole region must've been far too remote to garner much attention back in the empire's

heyday. Anyway, it all adds up. I really am on Earth after all. How'd it take me a whole seven years to realize it?

"Was this what you were hoping to see?"

"Yes, it's exactly what I wanted. I don't suppose you could show me an accurate map of the peninsula too?"

"There's a map of the kingdom in my husband's room."

"Would it be possible for me to view it now?"

"Yes, I'll lead you there."

Satsuki and I left the vault. On the way out, she closed and locked the door.

"This way."

After we'd walked along the corridor for a while, Satsuki brought me to a room that was lined with tightly packed bookshelves on either side. It was hard to believe that this private room had once belonged to a warrior; it looked more like a study than someone's personal quarters.

"This is a lot of books," I said.

"Once you live with us, you can read them all you like."

"I look forward to it."

I was no bookworm, but didn't mind sitting down with a book once in a while.

"Oh, it's right here on the desk..." Satsuki said.

The map had already been laid out. Since the maids were unlikely to touch things in this room, only Gok or Satsuki could put the map away. That meant Gok must've been looking at it before he left, and it'd remained on the desk since the expedition had set out.

A shadow came over Satsuki's previously happy face.

"Would I be allowed to take a look at it?" I asked.

"Yes... Please go ahead."

Satsuki put her hands under my armpits and lifted me up.

"Um..."

“You’ll be able to see it better if you sit on a chair.”

She scooped me up and put me on what had once been Gok’s chair. Her strength surprised me. Once she’d placed me down, Satsuki moved away and watched over me.

Uh... It helps, I guess.

I inspected the map and found that it showed two neighboring nations—the Shiyalta Kingdom and the Kilhina Kingdom. Both were on the Scandinavian Peninsula. The Kilhina Kingdom was at its base, roughly where Finland would’ve been.

Further to the east were the Dafide Kingdom and the Timna Kingdom, but each was partly cut off. The two countries had already ceased to exist.

The biggest difference between the Scandinavian Peninsula and what I remembered was that the end appeared to be missing a chunk around the Denmark region. The island that would’ve contained Copenhagen was completely gone. I couldn’t imagine the mapmakers forgetting to include that region completely, so it was possible that it didn’t exist at all.

Ho Province was now the tip of the peninsula and covered its southernmost parts.

“My husband was fighting here,” Satsuki explained as she pointed at the map.

That’s near Saint Petersburg.

Saint Petersburg was a city on the shore of the Baltic Sea, and it occupied part of the peninsula’s root. But Satsuki had pointed to a spot a little further inland. Basically, the fighting was happening in the eastern part of the Kilhina Kingdom where the peninsula connected to the mainland.

“There’s a fortress here. It’s the one Rakunu fled from.”

Geographically speaking, it was a good place for trade, but since relations between the Shanti and Kulati people were completely nonexistent, it probably wasn’t possible to establish a trading city on the border.

“Did the fighting start at the fortress?”

“Soon after the battles began, they suffered a defeat that forced them to

defend themselves from within the fortress.”

I didn’t know what sort of fortress Satsuki was talking about, but for some reason the soldiers there had needed to mount a suicide attack. If there had been any hope of reinforcements arriving and breaking the siege, such drastic measures wouldn’t have been necessary—their chances of success would be low, after all, so it was only chosen as a last resort.

I noticed that the fortress was positioned much further north than our current location. Perhaps they’d hoped that winter itself would join the battle. In a contest of endurance, would our side have run out of food before the enemy? It was impossible to answer based on guesswork. Without asking someone who’d actually been there, I wouldn’t know the specifics.

“Thank you. I understand now,” I said.

“Oh? What is it you understand?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to learn some geography.”

I’m not lying.

“Oh, really? Well I’m glad I helped.” She seemed willing to let me off without further questions.

“Well, it’s been a tiring day. I’d like to rest. Sorry for keeping you up so late,” I said.

“Not at all. Let me see you back to your room.”

“That’s all right. I’ll be fine by myself.”

I doubt I’ll need a guide to find my room from here.

“It’s easy to get lost at night. You can’t see anything outside, so even adults get lost sometimes. I hope you’ll be all right.”

Ugh... I thought I would be until she said that.

“In that case, is it too late to accept your offer?”

“Of course not. Let me take you there.”

In the end, I had Satsuki take me back to my room.

The corridors were dark and deathly silent. Even the richest households couldn't illuminate their corridors evenly at night. Considering the risk of a fire, increasing the number of torches might have even been foolish. The stairs were an exception, however—there was a torch placed wherever the stairway turned a corner because of the high tripping risk. Their thick wicks absorbed oil from canisters to create some fairly large flames. Once one's eyes had adjusted to the dark, it was easy to see where the stairs began and ended.

After navigating the stairs, we entered a corridor that seemed familiar. If I remembered correctly, heading straight would lead us to the room where Rook was sleeping.

But we got no further before hearing a strange voice—the sound of a girl crying.

The voice felt supernatural, and I felt a cold shiver run down my spine. It stood to reason that a manor like this would be home to a ghost or two. Not to mention that two people had died earlier today.

“U-Um...” As I turned to Satsuki, the sobbing stopped.

“Shush,” Satsuki whispered and gestured at me to be silent.

Maybe it's best to just keep quiet?

We walked a little further and then came to the owner of the voice.

“Sham, did you get lost again?” Satsuki asked.

Sham was sitting in the corridor with her knees to her chest. She'd been crying.

“Yes...” she replied with a sniffle. She looked relieved when she recognized Satsuki's face.

That's cute.

“Looks like we caught you at an embarrassing moment,” Satsuki said.

Sham then noticed me hidden in the darkness.

“Huh? Yuri?! It's not—”

“Sham, don't shout,” Satsuki chided before putting a finger to Sham's mouth

to close it.

I realized that the only other sounds around us were the distant snores of old men. We couldn't hear any forest creatures here, which made it quieter than my usual home. The shrill voice of a little girl could really carry through these corridors.

"I'm s-sorry..."

Sham was surprisingly obedient when faced with her mother.

"I'll head back to my room..." I said.

"No, wait. It only happened today... I don't normally get lost, honestly..." Sham muttered.

"I know, I know. You couldn't help it because it's so dark."

Between the pitch-black corridors and the rows of identical doors, it was hard for anyone to find their way. Still, it was odd to see Sham lost on the first floor when her room was somewhere on the second floor. Maybe she'd taken a wrong turn while worrying about ghosts—this manor was enough to give anyone a fear of them.

"I'm serious... Please believe me..." she whimpered.

I couldn't quite tell in the darkness, but I sensed her tearing up again.

"Don't worry. If anything, having a flaw or two just makes you cuter."

"I don't want you to think I'm stupid..."

Apparently, that was Sham's biggest concern. It hadn't even crossed my mind, though.

"I don't think that."

This has nothing to do with how smart you are...

Satsuki took Sham by the hand and began walking.

"Let's head back to our rooms. Yuri, your room is just up ahead."

“This is Kalakumo, where we are, isn’t it?” the boy asked.

“That’s right,” Satsuki replied as she watched him closely.

He was studying the map with great interest, as if it were the first time he’d seen one, even though such things were familiar to every noble in the kingdom.

“And my husband was fighting here,” she said, pointing to a spot on the map.

The boy grew thoughtful once more, though she couldn’t guess at what he was thinking.

Satsuki recalled yesterday’s events.



“...Which means, you don’t have to do anything yourself. Just make this false claim tomorrow,” the boy explained.

He had asked to speak to her without his father present and suggested a plan that was similar to a conspiracy. Satsuki truly struggled to understand all the details.

“Oh my... That’s certainly an interesting idea, but I’m not so sure Rakunu would fall for it.”

“Rakunu’s overconfident—he’s always full of himself. He’s the type that rushes into action without a second thought. It goes without saying that he looks down on my dad for abandoning his knighthood, and he probably thinks that I’m just a farmhand too. I’ll just tell Rakunu a lie that he wanted to believe from the start. He’ll think he was right all along so he won’t question it further.”

“I wonder...”

“But of course, he has to think that my dad isn’t on your side during the rest of the council. If we do act like we side with you, he’ll be suspicious when the enemy suddenly comes to his aid.”

Satsuki had been planning to get Rook on her side and then take the initiative in her debate with Rakunu. It was for this reason that Rook’s weak approach had been annoying her. In fact, she’d just been about to give him a piece of her mind. But if she were to follow the boy’s advice, Rook couldn’t confront Rakunu or even be unfriendly toward him.

“Maybe I’m misunderstanding your idea, but won’t it be dangerous for you to go to Rakunu alone? I don’t mean to scare you, but he could do something terrible.”

“Do you think we can win the vote if I don’t do anything?”

“Yes. I can’t say we’re guaranteed to win, but we have the most people on our side.”

“And if we win, what would it mean?”

“Oh...? I don’t understand the question,” Satsuki replied. *What’s he saying? If we win, it’ll all be over.*

“If Rook wins and becomes head of family, that doesn’t necessarily mean he can do whatever he likes. Would he be able to arrest Rakunu, charge him with treason, and then have him executed tomorrow?”

She hadn’t expected the boy to speak of such unpleasant matters.

“I...don’t know,” she responded.

“I don’t care if it means exiling the whole Ek family. Will dad be able to do it immediately, the moment he becomes head?”

Clouds of doubt started to gather in Satsuki’s heart. Rakunu Ek’s family had ruled over a port town to the south for generations. It had been theirs since days of old, and it couldn’t be easily confiscated without clear evidence of a crime.

It would be possible if the veracity of the wills was clearly demonstrated, of course. But her lack of ability to do just that was what had led to them arguing during the council. Even though Satsuki knew his will was fake, she had no way to make that obvious to everyone else.

It meant that even if Rook was chosen as the head, the charges made against Rakunu would be muddled by unanswered questions.

“If Rakunu returns home only for us to make charges against him later, he might ignore our summons and refuse to vacate his territory. We’d have no choice but to arrest him by force. In that case, I’m worried we might be caught in a civil war,” he continued.

“You’re right...”

Satsuki was forced to agree—what he said was true. If Rakunu refused to comply, an army would have to be raised to force him. Unfortunately, Rook’s lack of a knighthood could be a major problem when it came to raising an army.

There was no way that Queen Shimoné could settle the matter with a royal edict—this was a family affair. Turning to the queen for help would make the Ho family a laughingstock throughout the kingdom, and their rule would suffer for it.

“If it comes to that, would the other lords assist us? If our army had overwhelming superiority, we could crush him in a single blow just like suppressing any other minor rebellion. But what if it risked becoming a drawn-out war? Could we avoid that by reaching a compromise that allowed the Ek family to continue existing?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t say it’s impossible, but...isn’t it too soon to worry about that?”

The boy spoke of problems that hadn’t yet occurred. He seemed incredibly reluctant to leave future possibilities to chance.



It was true that the council was divided and the vote was going to be split. It was also true that having Rakunu executed after that could prove difficult, but there was also the possibility that Rakunu would submit quietly.

Satsuki preferred to deal with one problem at a time. Her hands were already full with the important issue before her today.

The boy seemed to have read Satsuki's train of thought, because he said, "Unfortunately, we're dealing with a proud and despicable man. I don't think he'll ever come quietly, he seems like the type who'll stop at nothing. I'm sure he'll continue to make attacks against you and my dad. And if the Ho family is forced into a war, it'll be impossible to secure a favorable outcome to insiders and outsiders alike. Are you confident that the local lords would continue to support us in the future if things were to reach that point? It doesn't matter how well you manage the province—you're not likely to win anyone over with something like an increase in crop yields."

Satsuki was getting a headache. In fact, she'd faced nothing but headache-inducing problems ever since Rakunu's return. She'd assumed that all she needed was to win the vote, but her optimism was fading fast. Now this boy was telling her that her struggles would continue for a long time, whether they won the vote or not.

"We don't know what might happen until we try..." she muttered, becoming a little irritated. In her mind, however, she could clearly picture the future that the boy described—it would be a narrow victory. Rakunu would oppose it loudly. Gradually, the lords would turn against her. It was all too realistic.

"Yes, that's true. My dad's so incredible that he might have a surprising amount of support among the lords. But I don't think the chances of that are particularly high."

"Your plan could have the opposite effect. It could make us lose. I can't simply agree to this."

If Rook remained quiet during the latter half of today's council rather than opposing Rakunu, it could sway the vote the other way. The lords would begin to think, *Does Rook even want to be head of family? We shouldn't force him into it if he's unwilling.*

The false claim she'd have to make the next day also gave her doubts. It would certainly be worth it if Rakunu fell into the trap, but if he saw through it, Satsuki would be the one humiliated. Needless to say, that would also impact the result of the vote. It was a dangerous gamble.

"If we win this way, everything will be settled the moment we win the vote. We have a chance to solve all of our problems at once," the boy said.

"I'm sorry, but I can't agree with this," Satsuki replied.

"Huh...? You don't have faith in me, Satsuki?"

The boy appeared incredulous, but it had to be an act. It sounded like a genuine question, but he should have known all too well that she had no faith in him.

"No. You're...awfully young."

"Ha ha." The boy laughed drily as if he found something amusing.

The boy's provoking attitude had begun to grate on Satsuki. She'd been racking her brain for a way to prove that her husband's will was genuine. She couldn't go along with this young boy's rash actions.

"Do you find something funny?" she asked.

"Yes, the whole thing is funny. Don't you think so too?"

She had no idea what he meant. It should have gone without saying that it was impossible for her to trust a child—one who wasn't even a quarter of her age—who had no skills.

"Gok decided to take a chance and entrusted the Ho family to me. If you think it was the wrong choice, then why are you even trying to execute his will?"



And now Satsuki stood here. Everything had worked out the way he'd said. Rakunu was imprisoned in the manor's dungeon, and her worries for the future had receded like clouds in the wind. In effect, the boy had resolved everything himself.

"Thank you, Satsuki. You've been a great help today. Good night."

The boy bowed to her politely, then closed the bedroom door. It was as though he'd been a completely different person the previous night.

My husband saw something in that boy...

Satsuki had no idea what that something was. All she knew was that her husband hadn't been mistaken.

"Mom."

She felt her beautiful daughter pull on her hand.

"Yes, let's go," Satsuki said as they began walking through the corridor.

Chapter 3 — Everyday Happenings

I

Three years had already passed since Rook was appointed as head of family, but I was still being worked to the bone.

“You’ll be a laughingstock if you enter the academy in this state,” an old, gray-haired man told me as I lay exhausted on the wooden floor of the dojo.

I’d spent a lot of time with him these past three years. His name was Soim Hao, and he was a knight who’d come out of retirement recently. In his younger days, he’d been an important member of expeditions.

Soim had raised and trained his only son as his successor, but he had died on the battlefield long ago, leaving a son behind. By then, Soim’s grandson was old enough to take charge of the family, but he too had recently passed away along with Gok.

Soim was one of several people who Satsuki had asked to assist with my education following the incident. He was apparently trusting someone else to manage his domain, and since his great-grandchild was five years younger than me, he would otherwise be spending his days idle. Now he filled his time by beating me with sticks and immobilizing me with various holds.

The arrangement worked out well for everyone but me.

Soim was more than ninety years old. Despite his age, the muscles concealed beneath his wrinkled skin had become more refined over the years, even as time weakened them. Those muscles, combined with his well-honed techniques, made him an exceptionally strong opponent.

I reached for my wooden spear once more as I began to get up. It was merely a plain, wooden rod, its tip painted a bright red to represent the blade. It was designed for use in children’s training.

Soim held another wooden rod, but his was wrapped in straw and covered

with an animal hide. He was careful not to injure me with his blows, but even a completely hollow bamboo sword could hurt someone. Despite all the padding, being hit with it still hurt.

I was on my feet again. Soim held his staff with both hands.

“Come at me when you’re ready,” he commanded.

I charged at him, thrusting and swiping, then withdrawing. I didn’t hold back as I launched a series of attacks against him, but he dodged or parried every single one.

When I was close to getting out of breath, he used a little extra force to parry one of my blows and instantly followed it up with a foot sweep. My legs buckled under me and I tumbled clumsily to the ground. I struck the ground with my arm—a technique I used to break my fall—so I was uninjured.

Damn.

Obviously, a child’s body was no physical match against an adult’s, but I still felt that his technique far surpassed mine. Even after training hard for three years, I still felt out of his league.

“That wasn’t bad, but you must learn when to retreat. This is what happens when you lose stamina but won’t draw back,” Soim lectured me.

“You would’ve gotten me regardless.”

“Heh... Be that as it may, you’ll always lose, young master, because there’s such a great difference in capability between us. But you need to think—if this were a battlefield, drawing back and holding out a little longer could have given a fellow soldier the opportunity to come to your aid and attack me. But if you were to fall to the ground because of a reckless attack, you wouldn’t stand a chance.”

For some reason, this old man liked to call me young master. I found it really embarrassing. In any case, what he was saying was true, so I couldn’t argue.

“You’re right.”

I steeled myself and then got to my feet again. I’d already caught my breath.

“Come at me when you’re ready.”

Shanti knights had a strange fixation with spears. They mostly trained with spears that were as long as their bodies, but that wasn't all they learned. Spears could be unwieldy, and no sensible person would carry one throughout the day or during their indoor work, so they normally also carried daggers. In the same way that warriors of Japan's Edo period would generally carry a weapon of some sort, the knights here would always carry a dagger with them when heading out.

The knights also made use of many types of spear-like weapons. For example, people who felt better suited to swinging rather than thrusting could use something resembling a polearm with a curved blade.

The fundamentals of Shanti close-quarters combat consisted of three different disciplines: spear arts (including short spear techniques), sword arts (including dagger techniques), and hand-to-hand martial arts. There were also bow arts and riding arts for those who rode birds.

"Hah! Hah!" I deliberately cried out as I dodged each of the attacks Soim aimed at me with his spear.

I held a wooden dagger in my hand now, and I'd step back at the last moment when he thrust at my legs, or twist my body when he thrust at my face. Somehow, I was able to dodge each attack.

I remained just within reach of his spear, making it possible to evade by stepping back, so dodging each attack as it came was actually quite easy.

He also seemed to slow his approach to match my speed, ensuring he never drew closer.

I held up my dagger with the hilt gripped in one hand. When the spear thrust toward me—just barely missing my chest—I grabbed the shaft with my empty hand.

Spear-bearers hated it when the opponent caught their shaft. Even if the wielder attempted to shake them off, the human arm could put more force into pulling than pushing, so it wasn't easy to break free. That meant their opponent could get close and stab the spear-bearer while they struggled, which was a common way for them to die despite their apparent advantage.

I was so weak that I wouldn't be able to maintain my grip for long. By pulling on the spear and using it to propel myself forward, I used his attack as a chance to get closer. Without losing momentum, I swung with my dagger, aiming for the spear's grip.

Soim had already removed his hand from the spear's grip, leaving me without a target. He then used his free fist to aim at my hand.

When Soim first struck the back of my hand, it sent a jolt up my entire arm. He'd hit me hard, and I froze up as a result. He took the opportunity to deliver a soft kick to my stomach, sending me falling onto my back. Just as I broke my fall, he thrust the spear toward me, pressing its tip against my stomach. I had clearly been defeated.

After sparring, we ran a lap around the manor together as a cooldown exercise. The day's training ended with me drenched in sweat.

"I'll see you for more training tomorrow. Rest well until then."

"Thank you."

I was scheduled to receive a lesson from Satsuki after lunch.



"Listen to me," my teacher scolded and smacked me on the head.

"Whoa!"

I awoke with a start. *Oh, man, I was half-asleep.*

"You fell asleep, didn't you?"

"Uh... Yes."

"Is this really that boring?"

My teacher, Satsuki, looked unhappy with me.

Of course it's boring. I can't believe they expect me to take this lesson after intense exercise and a meal. How could I not fall asleep? It's heartless to even ask it of me.

"No, I'll do my best."

“Now memorize ‘lantern kakikaki winter snow.’”

What...?

“Huh?”

“I just explained this. It’s how we conjugate the verb when the subject is a grandmother.”

In this case, “grandmother” was a linguistic term that referred to aged women.

“You remember how it changes depending on whether the object is a grandfather, man, item, land, royalty, grandmother, or woman, don’t you?”

“Uh... What...?”

As I was barraged by this heap of information, I felt my consciousness starting to slip away again.

Satsuki was determined to teach me Ancient Shanish, and it went like this every single time.

“So we follow the verb with ‘lantern kakikaki winter snow.’ For both young women and old women, ‘snow’ stays the same in both cases, so that’s one less thing for you to remember.”

Uhhh... One less thing out of seven doesn’t make it a whole lot easier, does it?

I was still struggling with the whole idea of verbs that changed depending on the object.

Of course, verbs changed forms in Japanese and English too. Verbs were generally conjugated depending on subject and tense, but I’d never known a verb to change depending on whether the object was an old man or woman.

Such a language would need an absurdly high number of verb inflections—it should’ve been too ridiculous to exist. But, believe it or not, this was just such a language. Oh, and verbs didn’t just change depending on the subject and object—they changed with the level of politeness too, which created yet another complication.

Maybe a strange world where verbs had the power to drive everyone crazy

actually made for a peaceful civilization—a place where everyone stuck to adjectives for expressing their day-to-day thoughts. But as far as I was concerned, this was a world of psychological horror, unbound by the rules of rationality.

There was no way my brain, limited by my puny common sense, could have conceived of such a language.

Needless to say, there'd never been a time or place where people had actually spoken this language. Even in the empire's heyday, it was only ever used in writing. No doubt the intelligentsia of the time had had way too much time on their hands and used it to twist the language into the ridiculous mess that it was.

"Um, why am I learning this?" I wondered, repeating the same question I'd asked countless times already.

"You'll need to know it so you can read old texts." Satsuki gave the same reply as always.

"Um... Will that help me to use magic or something?"

"What? Where did you get that nonsense from?"

"Just thought I'd ask..."

I sighed to myself. *I'd be willing to put some real effort into this if it let me use magic.*

"I don't understand why you hate classic texts so much, Yuri. It's just rote memorization, no different from history..." Satsuki said with a frown.

It's nothing like history.

I couldn't see any reason to learn it at all. If Rook had been an archeologist who'd hoped for me to follow in his footsteps, then I'd understand the need to read Ancient Shanish. An archeologist would obviously need to read ancient texts. But I had no such interest in old texts, and therefore no need. There wasn't a single person still living who used this bizarre language in speech or writing.

"Look, you'll never be able to call yourself cultured until you learn how to

read Ancient Shanish. Now why not write this down and memorize it?”

For the first time in a long while, I remembered exactly how it felt to be a little kid who would rather do anything besides study.



The trials of the body and the mind were over, and I was heading to Sham’s room with lifeless, glazed eyes. My lessons weren’t exactly torture, but they left me mentally exhausted and unsteady on my feet. I needed to see Sham to soothe my soul.

No one responded when I knocked, so I unlatched the door and opened it.

“Hey.”

Sham was motionless at her desk and holding a pen.

“Sham?”

“Oh! Yuri?”

The second time I called her, she noticed me and jumped in shock. She must have been concentrating so hard that she hadn’t heard me open the door.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“I can come back later if you’re busy.”

I didn’t want anything in particular, so I wasn’t about to get in the way of her studies just to make myself feel better.

“Kepler’s laws really are amazing.”

“Oh, you’re thinking about complicated stuff again.”

“This heliocentric model explains everything. It predicts Mercury’s position perfectly, and it even clears up all the mysteries behind Mars’s movements. I’m still struggling to believe it, though.”

She still doesn’t fully accept it? I’ve never seriously studied astronomy myself, so I don’t know what kind of movements she’s talking about, but it sounds like she’s just solved a big problem. That’s good.

“Well, I’m glad.”

“The existing model says that Mars and the other planets orbit around the Sun,” Sham added.

Huh? What?

“Isn’t that heliocentrism already?” I asked.

Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, and the other planets orbited the Sun. I already knew that—that wasn’t mysterious at all.

“No, because the model places Earth at the center with the Sun in orbit around it. To put it another way, the Sun is like a second moon that’s further from Earth than the actual Moon. The other planets orbit the Sun like they’re its moons. That’s how the model arranges things.”

What? This world is weird. Since I knew how massive the sun was, it was hard to even imagine.

“With enough coefficients, the old model predicts the motions of the heavens rather well,” she continued.

That can’t be right.

“It does?”

I took a seat; it felt like her explanation could go on for a long time.

“Well, if you watch Mars’s movement throughout the year, this is the pattern it follows, doesn’t it?”

Sham sketched something on a piece of wood before showing it to me. She’d drawn a backwards letter Z and a shape resembling a ribbon with a loop in it. Mars moved in the strangest way.

I’ll just pretend I already knew that.

“Of course,” I replied.

“If Mars had a circular orbit about the Earth, you wouldn’t see a pattern like this.”

I could understand that much, at least. Leaving aside how small Mars appeared in the sky, it would move straight across the night sky just like the

Moon if it orbited around the Earth. That was common sense.

“But you can explain everything when you think about how Mars would orbit the Sun,” she continued.

“Ah, I see.”

Kind of like the teacups at a fairground. Someone sitting at the center of a merry-go-round would never see the people that were riding on the horses move against the direction of rotation. But if the riders were in spinning teacups, an observer might see them move in the opposite direction for just a moment. Their geocentrism is surprisingly well thought out.

“I suppose it’s like they say: if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail,” I said.

“What do you mean? Is that a proverb or something?”

“That’s right.”

“I’ve never heard it before. But yes, you’re right—faulty reasoning can just be covered up with more reasoning, and then you can force your model to work on anything by inserting more coefficients.”

The model must’ve needed lots of different numerical constants that contradicted each other if it worked well enough for Sham to accept it. And obviously the model only worked on paper because it ignored the magnitude of the sun’s gravity. I’d be surprised if the contradictions weren’t apparent at a glance. It must’ve been a really complicated calculation.

“This new model explains everything neatly with no need for contrived reasoning. It’s wonderful, if I do say so myself—beautiful, in fact. Everything is in harmony.”

“That’s great.”

Well, at least she’s happy. I wonder if I used to make that same face back when I worked in the lab... No, of course I didn’t. I never had her passion. My research topics weren’t chosen based on my own personal interests—they had to take the world’s needs into consideration.

“Oh. I’m not sure what I meant by ‘if I do say so myself.’ It was you who

thought of it, Yuri.” Sham sounded apologetic.

“No, it doesn’t matter who thought of it...”

I just happened to know it. I didn’t think of it myself, so I don’t care who takes credit. I might think differently if I could make money from it, but I don’t want fame and respect earned from a theory that Kepler came up with long ago in another world. I’d feel guilty for stealing someone else’s work if I took the credit.

“I think it does matter, but anyway... I’ve gone over it quite thoroughly now.”

Thoroughly?

“No one’s forcing you, you know,” I added.

You’re free to do other things. Like...playing house. I know I can’t tell her to go watch PreCure, but her generation has to have something to do for fun.

“I can’t help it. I enjoy it too much.”

It didn’t sound like she was forcing herself.

That’s impressive. She’s got some serious brains.

When I was her age—back when there were still only 151 Pokémon—I’d lost my mind when a friend had given me a Mew that someone created with a duplication glitch. Meanwhile, my cousin here understood the binomial theorem and trigonometric functions. Plus, she’d even verified a model of the solar system based on Kepler’s laws. That’s what gave her joy.

“Why don’t we go outside? We might find something fun,” I suggested.

It’s good to step outdoors once in a while.

“Um...” She was obviously opposed to that idea.

“Why not? It’ll clear your head.”

“My head’s quite clear already. You’re awfully unsophisticated at times, Yuri...”

Unsophisticated? I guess Sham is sick of people telling her what I just did. Maybe there’s nothing relaxing about going outside when you’re a shut-in at heart.

“But if you think it’s a good idea, Yuri...”

It was already dusk when we left the manor.

Ginkgo trees were planted in the manor’s garden and the leaves had already begun to discolor and fall due to the season. There was a faint smell of ginkgo nuts, but not enough to be unpleasant. The trees didn’t line the paths, which meant that no one stepped on the nuts, and the servants would collect them before they could begin to rot. I’d seen them do it.

There were few evergreens in this area, so the greenery would disappear in winter. It was a little sad to see.

At this time of year, we could feel the cold in our bones. We wore fur jackets, but that didn’t keep our extremities warm.

“Winter’s just around the corner,” I said softly.

“Your dad says things like that.”

Ugh... That feels like a roundabout way of telling me that I sound like an old man.

“Do you know why this region’s so cold?” I asked.

I’ll try talking about a subject she enjoys. Lucky for me, I’ve got no shortage of scientific topics to talk about.

“Hm...? Isn’t that just because we’re in the north?”

“But how far we are north or south shouldn’t have any effect on how many hours of sunlight we receive per year, should it?”

Any place that experienced a midnight sun would also have polar nights to balance it out. The average length of a day throughout the year at the equator and at the poles wasn’t significantly different. Plus, just because the sun never set during a polar summer didn’t mean that it became scorching hot like it did by the equator.

“Now that you mention it... I don’t know...”

Sham began to think. It was one of the things I liked about this smart girl—she resisted simply seeking the answer from someone else. It felt good to teach her

because she'd always try to find the solution herself.

"Is it related to atmospheric and ocean currents?" she asked.

Well, that is one factor.

"It's the angle of the sun."

"Angle...? It's related to angle?"

"An easy way to think about it is to imagine a hearth."

I put my hands out in front of me.

"If you hold your palms facing the fire like this, it feels hot. But if you tilt them like this, you don't get much heat. It reduces the quantity of heat being supplied across the entire surface area. In this region, the sun's rays always hit us at an angle, don't they?"

"Aaaah... I see..." Sham's mouth hung wide open in amazement.

"And that's what makes this region cold."

"I want to know more."

"Bearing that in mind, take a look at this."

Getting into the flow, I picked up a fallen ginkgo leaf.

"At what?" she asked.

It seemed Sham had cheered up and was now enjoying herself.

"This leaf."

"Hm?"

"It fell from the tree, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"Why did it fall? Or more to the point, why did the tree give up its leaves?"

"Hmm," she mused. "I don't know. I just know that's how those trees are."

"You're right that this type of tree sheds its leaves, but that's obvious."

"Okay..."

“Everything freezes here during the winter. It’s a survival strategy to protect against that problem,” I explained.

“Ah, it loses its leaves because they would all freeze. I see.”

She catches on quickly.

“But growing this many leaves and then re-growing them each year places a heavy burden on the plant. In human terms, it would be like cutting off your arms and re-growing them each year.”

“But there’s no other way, is there? They’d freeze otherwise. If it kept the leaves, they’d just freeze to death and drop off anyway, wouldn’t they?”

That’s true.

“There are lots of countermeasures plants can use against freezing. For example, if the leaf is thick enough, sap will continue to flow through an inner core that doesn’t freeze. Or the surface might be protected by a material that doesn’t freeze easily. Then it wouldn’t have to lose its leaves when the temperature drops a little.”

“Now that I think about it, yes. But the trees don’t do that.”

“In a region as cold as this, it doesn’t work. That’s why there are no plants like that. From the plant’s point of view, growing new leaves each year is easier than maintaining leaves that are thick enough to withstand the cold here.”

“But that wouldn’t be the case if it was a little warmer?”

“Right. Even in this kingdom, there are plants that stay green year-round that way. They grow in the southernmost regions. It’s like there are boundary points—if you go even further south, you’ll find lots of plants with thin leaves that can survive all year. The other plants disappear because there’s no need for any protection against the cold.”

“Wow... I get it.”

“Though other life-forms find it easy to live in that environment too, so instead they have to fight off insects that eat their leaves... That’s interesting too, right?”

“Yes!” Sham exclaimed with a bashful smile.

“We should start heading back,” I said.

“You’re right. It’s getting cold.”

Dinner should be done pretty soon.

In the distance, I saw the guards at the gate being replaced by those working the night shift.

II

I learned that it was possible to enter the Knight Academy from the age of ten. In this country, people weren’t given career choices. Boys who were selected to enter the Knight Academy had their future decided from birth. Unless they were seriously ill on the day of admission, or there was some other exceptional circumstance, children who were destined to become knights would generally join the academy at a young age.

I was ten myself, so I’d be starting soon. Naturally, there was no need to pass an exam to get into the academy. I wondered why I was being made to train and study like my life depended on it, but that wasn’t my main concern at the moment.

Satsuki had said years ago that Rook’s life didn’t have to change, but it had been turned upside down regardless.

If he’d left his new duties to others, he would have been able to continue managing his ranch like he had in the past, but Rook felt too great a sense of responsibility. He’d begun to leave virtually all tasks on the ranch to others so that he could focus on serving as the head of a chieftain family. He met with knights serving under him, held discussions, appointed people to appropriate positions, and began reassembling the family’s forces.

But that didn’t mean he stopped managing the ranch completely. He still kept it going as a sort of side project. However, it was more like a pastime now, and he always used his personal kingeagle when he visited the ranch.

In the past, Rook had never owned an eagle despite being head of the ranch. When the necessity arose, he used to ride whichever bird he was busy training to sell. Taking care of eagles was expensive, and keeping one that he’d never

sell would've been a waste of space in the enclosure.

But things were different now, so Rook had begun to keep a kingeagle that was just his. His fondness of eagles was clear from the way he pampered it every day.

Suzuya was initially angry at the change and struggled to adapt, but now she seemed to be coping with her new arrangement. She'd built good relationships with her maids and female attendants, and lived a laid-back life that involved gardening and cooking. Perhaps it was fortunate that she'd always been easygoing.

Suzuya rarely hosted social events, with the excuse being that she was too sickly to handle the task. Although she was quite capable of putting on an elegant dress and hosting a gathering, her farm-based upbringing and lack of formal education made it difficult to chat with guests about internal politics and military affairs. There wasn't an easy solution to the problem, since receiving the necessary education demanded a great sacrifice from her. Fortunately, no one forced Suzuya to do so, and Satsuki generally hosted events as her representative.

That was about the extent of the changes. It was true that our lives were radically different, but in the end it didn't leave us much worse off.

"Sorry, but I won't be going to the ranch tomorrow," Rook said at the dinner table one day.

This wasn't incredibly rare, although Rook's schedule was often booked a month in advance, making sudden changes an uncommon occurrence. No one could predict when an elder family member might die. Funerals would sometimes appear on his schedule without warning.

Still, the announcement was disappointing. For me, the time spent doing simple work and training on the ranch was the most fun I had, and it made for a welcome change of scenery.

"Is there another funeral?" I asked.

"Not this time."

Okay, not that.

“Then what is it? Have you been summoned by the queen?”

“There’s a plague spreading in a town down south.”

A plague? That sounds ominous.

“They say it’s the sorepox.”

I see. I’ve heard about that.

“Isn’t it better to stay away?” I asked.

“You know I can’t do that. My subjects need me,” he chided, as if my suggestion was foolish.

I wanted to ask him what was going through his head.

“But what if you catch it yourself?”

“You worry too much, Yuri. I won’t get it that easily.”

You’re sure? If you’re talking from experience, then all right. But I doubt there’s any scientific basis behind that claim.

“In that case, I’ll come too.”

“Oh... You? But you might—”

“I won’t catch it that easily. You said so yourself.”

“Yes, but...you’re just a boy...”

Rook clearly disliked the idea. I wanted to tell him, *Well then, you shouldn’t go either.*

“I’d like to see what sort of disease sorepox is. Please let me come.”

“All right, but make sure you do as I tell you.”

It’s you who needs my advice. I bit my tongue to stop from yelling my thoughts out loud.

Early the next morning, the father and son pair headed out on a kingeagle.

I would soon grow and gain too much weight to be able to ride together with Rook, so he let me take the reins while we were cruising in order to practice.

Ho Province covered a vast swath of land, and all of the southern regions of

the peninsula were part of our family's territory. The town we were heading to was a hundred kilometers from Kalakumo.

Kingeagles obviously didn't have built-in GPS navigation systems. Although there were folding pieces of wood that could be fastened to a map to stop it from blowing away in the wind, it was generally necessary to know the route before setting out. People like Rook had the maps and the look of the land below memorized well enough to fly to wherever they were asked, but that was beyond me.

I was doing my best to follow the map I'd memorized while using the position of the sun as a rough indication of my heading. Once I'd reached the sky above the city closest to our destination, Rook gave me a couple pats on my helmeted head to congratulate me.

At this point, I passed him the reins because I didn't know the rest of the way. Rook aimed the kingeagle's wings toward the northwest. Before long, we saw a cloud of white smoke. It was rising straight up, which could be partially explained by the lack of wind, but it was too orderly to be any burning field—it was a smoke signal.

Rook aimed the kingeagle toward it and descended.

According to the books I'd read, sorepox had been around since ancient times. The disease had initially been introduced from Kulati nations in the days of the Shantila Empire. Once someone was infected, there was no effective treatment, and it proved fatal roughly half of the time. That was all the knowledge I had on the topic.

After we alighted from the eagle, I gave Rook three long pieces of towel-like cloth before we entered the settlement where the sorepox was spreading.

"Here," I said.

"What are these?" Rook asked, looking confused.

"Use them to cover your mouth and nose, please."

I used a similar piece of cloth to hide my own mouth and nose. It was stuffy, but I could still breathe through it.

“What for?”

“Huh...? Well, obviously, it’s to stop us from getting infected.”

I immediately regretted my choice of words. This sort of understanding wasn’t widespread in this world.

Although people knew from experience that diseases with certain symptoms were infectious, they didn’t know about the nature of infections themselves—or the existence of pathogens and viruses for that matter. They thought that illnesses could be caused by poison rising up from cursed ground.

It went without saying that explaining things to Rook wasn’t easy.

“Anyhow, this will greatly reduce the chances of us being infected with the disease.”

“But this makes us look stupid,” he complained.

He does have his image as the local ruler to think about. His subjects will probably think something like, “His Lordship’s here, but he’s got a weird mask on like he’s scared of diseases. He’s no better than a commoner.”

“But if you carry the disease home, mom’s going to get it while she’s taking care of you, and then Satsuki and I might get infected too. The disease could be the end of our family. What’ll *really* be stupid is if we all die just because you were worried about how you look,” I pointed out in a serious tone.

“A-All right... I’ll wear it...” Rook reluctantly put the piece of cloth over his face.

We entered the settlement on foot. There, we found a guide who brought us to a building that had originally been made for gatherings. It looked like a hall for town meetings, banquets, and that sort of thing.

“This is where we keep sick people who have no one to care for them,” he explained before opening the door.

We entered and choked on the heavy stench that hung in the air.

I wanted to look away the moment I saw the interior; it was a grotesque sight.

The diseased masses lay on makeshift beds made from no more than a few

gunnysacks. Their faces and arms were covered with dense clusters of fluid-filled blisters, each about the size of a fingertip. Whatever skin wasn't exposed likely suffered a similar fate. Those with particularly severe symptoms were essentially buried under their blisters to the extent that it was hard to find an inch of healthy skin. The blisters must have burst easily, because some of them had bloody faces caused by scratching their skin. All of them appeared to be suffering from a high fever.

This is awful.

"Dad, please don't touch any of these people, no matter what," I whispered, making sure the others didn't hear me. I'd much rather have told him to get out of this building right now.

"I wasn't going to." Rook sounded like he wouldn't dream of touching them anyway—people here at least knew that touching an infected person was a way of contracting an illness. "This is horrible..."

Rook examined each person closely as he walked a full circle around the room. Just watching him made me anxious. It was like standing by while a baby innocently played with a freshly sharpened dagger. Once Rook had finished his rounds and came back to me, I took his hand and pulled him away.

"Wh-Whoa. Hold up."

I pulled firmly, leading him toward the exit.

"Please open the door for us," I said to our guide.

The guide looked at us a little warily. He must've wanted to say, *Open it yourself if you're in such a hurry.*

Obviously, we couldn't do that. In my eyes, the door was likely covered in pus from the blisters of the afflicted—a potent poison.

"Please open it now," I insisted.

The guide opened the door when I asked a second time, and we hurried out of the small room.

"What's gotten into you?" Rook asked.

"If you stay in that room, you're going to get sick too."

It would have been another matter if Rook had already contracted this illness in the past, but I didn't think that was the case. His face was unmarked, and he'd never talked of getting sick before.

"Don't exaggerate." Rook looked at me, unsure how to react to his son's behavior.

"I'm not exaggerating at all."

I now had an idea of what this illness was: it looked just like smallpox.

Smallpox was a disease caused by contracting the smallpox virus. Once someone was infected, there was an incubation period, followed by symptoms presenting in the form of the pus-filled blisters all over the body. The blisters weren't just limited to the skin's surface either—the same lumps would also appear on internal organs, and inflammation would occur both inside and outside of the body.

A high fever of close to forty degrees Celsius was often observed for several consecutive days. This would drain the patient's strength and eventually lead to their death. If the patient was fortunate, antibodies appeared after a few days and eradicated the virus, so the fatality rate was only around forty percent. Then again, *only* forty percent fatality was no small number, and that was just an average. The actual rate varied. For example, the fatality rate would be higher in communities where people were weak because of a food shortage caused by poor crop yields.

This was how it affected humans. It might have been even worse for Shanti.

The high infection rate of smallpox already made it difficult to control, but when the symptoms appeared, it only grew more infectious. Pus-filled blisters would grow all over the patient's body, leaving behind gunk and bits of skin on their surroundings. Needless to say, the unpleasant debris would be rich in the smallpox virus and highly infectious. It could easily end up on people's hands, the soles of their shoes, and the rest of their clothing, leading the infection to spread.

To make matters worse, the smallpox virus was incredibly resilient. It didn't lose its potency the moment it left the body like HIV did. The smallpox virus could survive and remain active for a long time—close to a year, in fact—within

flakes of skin.

This combination of features was what made the rates of infection and mortality so high, and the disease so hard to control.

“All right, all right. But what can I do?” Rook asked.

“Let’s get right back to the manor,” I suggested.

“I can’t do that.”

Huh?

“I have a responsibility as their ruler. I have to help my subjects somehow. I can’t just run away and abandon them because I’m scared of the disease.”

Well, he might be right about that.

“What were you planning to do?” I asked.

“Well, I can gather people from nearby and ask them to bring food from their storero—”

“Providing food is fine, but gathering people here will just help the disease spread. A ruler’s job isn’t to infect a thousand people in an attempt to help the hundred or so here. You need to limit the infection to this initial group.”

“Maybe you’re right. But what else can I do? Just wait for everyone here to die? What sort of ruler would that make me?”

He picks the worst times to turn conscientious.

“Please listen to my idea. We need to make it so the infection won’t spread even if more people visit this area. We need a way to give people resistance to the disease—that way, they won’t get sick.”

“What...?”

“Let’s see how things are on a farm near the village. We’ll need to find one where they’ve got a cow—one that produces a lot of milk for the village would be best.”

“Didn’t you want to go home?”

“Honestly, yes. I’d prefer giving this task to someone else, but it won’t take

long. Let's just do it ourselves."

I reasoned that if we did get infected, we'd need to administer the vaccine before it was too late. If antibodies were produced before the smallpox virus started replicating within the body, the symptoms would never appear.

"All right then," Rook agreed. "Let's go."

A short while later, we arrived at the farm that our guide had told us about. As expected, life was peaceful for the people who lived here. Although the family worried about being infected, none of them had contracted smallpox so far.

I thanked them and left.

"I knew it. They're healthy."

"Isn't it just a coincidence?" Rook was skeptical.

"No. Every member of the family has a resistance that prevents them from getting sick. It's because they all milk the cows."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard to explain... There's another disease similar to sorepox that affects cows. The cows have symptoms similar to those of sorepox, but it just causes a few blisters around the udders—they don't die from it. That disease can then pass from cows to humans, but the symptoms in humans are mild. At worst, they get just a couple of blisters and feel a little fatigued. Once they've had that illness, they won't catch sorepox. The people here have already caught the milder disease from milking the infected cows."

"I don't follow. Why does that stop them from getting sick?"

"Because... Okay, let's put it this way: once their bodies have experience fighting against a similar enemy, catching the disease won't prove fatal anymore."

The disease that cows contracted was known as cowpox in Japan, and though it was infectious to humans, it wasn't particularly harmful. It was like a weakened variant of smallpox that gave immunity to anyone infected—basically, it worked like a vaccine. As such, using it as a vaccine against smallpox

had been one of the earliest methods of preventing the deadlier disease.

And fortunately, while smallpox *was* a devastating infectious disease, inoculation was incredibly effective against it. It was different from HIV or influenza in that regard. Plus, once someone was given immunity through inoculation, there was no chance they'd contract smallpox until their immunity was lost. Even if someone did catch it, the chances of them infecting others could be kept to a minimum if the local population was already immunized.

"I don't understand any of this. I've never heard anything like it," Rook said.

"You haven't? Well, either way, that's just how it is."

"Then what do you suggest I do?"

"Find a cow with blisters around its udders and use a pin to drain out its contents. Then, you apply the contents on a person's arm and wound them around the same spot. Make sure it draws blood. If they were successfully infected with the mild disease, there'll be some reaction. That's all there is to it."

"Okay...I get it. If you insist, then I'll try it."

Finally, Rook was actually listening to me. Not that he was ever unwilling to act, it was just that there weren't many adults who were willing to act on what a ten-year-old had suddenly told them to do. If I hadn't built up trust with Rook over the years, he would've laughed at the idea. Still, I don't think any amount of trust would've gotten an adult who was less levelheaded than him to go along with it. I owed him my gratitude.

"Now let's go home for the day," I suggested.

Once we'd returned to the manor by kingeagle, I made sure we avoided everyone until we'd cleaned ourselves. We both removed our clothes and shoes and stored them in a trunk. Then, we used strong spirits to wash our hands and faces—the areas that had been exposed. Once we'd bathed, we put on fresh clothes, and I left the trunk with our contaminated things deep within a storeroom away from everyone.

Rook was bemused by it all, but he went along with it. I felt like I was making him lose a lot of his confidence in me, but that was the price I had to pay.

Two days later, we found a cow infected with cowpox and used it to inoculate everyone living in the nearest village who hadn't already been infected. Then, we kept away until the infection rate in the village had dropped.

Although Rook and I seemed fine, I'd inoculated us anyway. It'd be too late if I waited until symptoms occurred. After four days, I assumed we were in the clear. If we had been sick, the symptoms must have been mild.

I hadn't been confident that the cowpox method would prove to be effective, but most of the immunized people avoided infection, so it had to be working like I'd hoped. The small number of people who did get infected were probably those who hadn't received their inoculation properly.

It really was smallpox.

A slight chill ran down my spine and mingled with a feeling of relief. It hadn't turned into a major incident. It was all over now.

Chapter 4 — Knight Academy

I

Now that I was ten, I was ready to enter the Knight Academy that I'd heard so much about.

I was feeling blue about the whole situation and found it difficult to find a silver lining. For starters, I didn't want to let go of the life I was used to. Neither the hustle and bustle of the city nor the idea of living with a bunch of ten-year-olds appealed to me.

Since I'd come to this world, I'd probably enjoyed the period between age one and seven the most. After that, I'd been forced to study history, Shanish, and then Ancient Shanish. I didn't make much progress with the last subject, so no good had come of it.

I'd also been beaten senseless by Soim. Speaking of which, a few days ago he'd presented me with a dagger that had been a family heirloom of his. Despite everything he'd put me through, I was so moved by my memories of our three years of daily training that I'd surprised myself by starting to cry.

The Ho family had a residence in the royal capital where my whole family and I were staying in preparation for the admission ceremony. We could stay here without needing to make arrangements.

But first I had to face the entrance exam.

You would be forgiven for thinking it was an exam I had to pass in order to get into the academy. In truth, it was just a test of my ability rather than a requirement. I wouldn't be denied admission if I did badly, but it would determine which class I was placed in.

Elementary schools didn't exist in this kingdom. Education was generally handled by home tutors up until the age of ten, so students' academic levels varied heavily. Those placed in the lowest class might even have to start by

learning to read and write. That would be like an inverted form of the torture I'd gone through with Satsuki, so I really wanted to do well.

It was the morning of the exam.

"Honestly, I'm fine. You don't need to come. I can go by myself," I pleaded to my parents.

Rook was insistent. "What are you saying? Of course we're coming with you. Don't worry, we won't embarrass you. The other children will have their moms and dads with them too."

I'd planned to go there alone, but my parents had other plans. I'd expected a maid to bring me a school uniform, but instead, Rook, Suzuya, and I were all dressed in formal attire. They were all set to come along with me.

Why do my parents have to get dressed up and come along for a proficiency test? I hate this.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"I wouldn't lie about it, would I?"

Is he being serious...? I'd hate to be the only kid there with overprotective parents.

"Are you embarrassed to be seen with me, Yuri...?" Suzuya asked, looking upset.

"It's not like that," I hurriedly reassured her. "I'm always proud of my mom."

"Then why would you want to go alone?"

"I just didn't want to cause you both so much trouble... It's just an exam."

"Trouble? You know it's never a problem for us to be there for our son on his big day," Suzuya replied, staring straight at me.

When she looked at me like that, I couldn't help but think I was in the wrong.

I guess there's no arguing with a mother's love...

Knowing I couldn't win, I caved.

"I'm sorry. I take it back. I'm happy to have you with me today."

“All right. We’ll be there to cheer you on.”

When a mother like Suzuya said something like that, any son would feel compelled to try their hardest.

I’ll give it my best. I guess.

The three of us boarded a carriage before setting out. I realized that this was my first time traveling through the royal capital in a carriage. Up to now, I’d always moved through the city on foot, and since we usually couldn’t use national stagecoach birds, we’d head home using some form of public transport.

I stared out the carriage window for twenty minutes, watching the city’s scenery go by, before we came to a large, walled-in structure. The carriage followed the wall, and then turned in order to enter through a large gate.

As expected, this was the Knight Academy; I knew as much because Rook had already told me. The walls seemed to stretch on forever without interruption, and there were many trees on the other side. Actually, there was more to the place than just the school I was to attend—the Knight Academy and Cultural Academy existed side by side within the same grounds. They were collectively known as “the academy,” which meant that the large gate we’d just passed through was the academy’s main gate.

It was almost accurate to think of the Knight Academy as a boys’ school and the Cultural Academy as a girls’ school, but there were plenty of exceptions. There hadn’t been a single girl in Rook’s year back when he was at the Knight Academy, but there’d been several boys at the Cultural Academy.

If the Knight Academy was like the physical education department, then the Cultural Academy was like the humanities one. The latter was where most of the people with the strange status of “witch” would go to study.

As weird as the name sounded, women with that title had nothing to do with magical combat; they were involved in purely clerical work. They were mostly just bureaucrats in service to the royal family. If this was Japan during the days of the shogunate, their status would have been less like a daimyo and more like a hatamoto or gokenin serving under a shogun.

Girls from witch families made up the majority of the students at the Cultural Academy. After that, boys from witch families were the next most common, and then girls from knight families who were simply there to receive an education.

Needless to say, the Knight Academy's students were mostly boys from knight families. There were also a few boys and an even smaller number of girls from witch families who intended to take up some special post.

Girls from witch families and boys from knight families could easily become bureaucrats and military officers, respectively. For everyone else, things were more complicated.

A boy from a witch family could earn a knighthood by graduating from the Knight Academy, which would allow them to serve the royal family as part of the royal guard, as long as they were of suitably high standing. Alternatively, they might make the right connections during their time at school and get into an order of knights which served under a chieftain family. The smart ones could also become bureaucrats, though their gender would preclude them from reaching a ministerial role. Their situation presented no obvious path in life, and they'd be at a disadvantage whatever happened. Since the kingdom's aristocracy was relatively liberal, though, they wouldn't be forced into any particular career. Their families expected little of them, so many would abandon their families to become a merchant, or even a farmer in a handful of cases.

Girls from knight families could also simultaneously train to become bureaucrats if they were smart enough, though they'd normally end up marrying into another knight family. The ones who were sent to the Cultural Academy were mostly from high-ranking families, and their education was purely for the purpose of ensuring a good marriage. Satsuki was one such example.

In the rare event that a girl from a witch family entered the Knight Academy, a glorious future awaited her as an officer in the royal guard—though examples of this were few and far between.

Few women entered the forces of chieftain families, but the royal guard was a

completely unrelated force. It was funded and maintained by the royal family and the seven powerful witch families, often simply known as the seven witches. The supreme commander of the royal guard was the queen herself, and all ranks above a certain level were held by women.

That said, girls who wanted to train with spears and join the armed forces were so rare that even the royal guard were mostly men. Still, those men were kept firmly under control by the female soldiers.

Rook's friend Galla was one such example. He'd been wildly successful, climbing to the position of vice captain in a regiment of five hundred knights within the first order of the royal guard. That, however, was as high as he could go outside of exceptional circumstances. He'd forever be at the beck and call of legion captains, high commanders, and other higher-ranking officers.



There was already a procession of carriages forming when we entered through the main gate.

There were many adults present. So many, in fact, that they seemed to outnumber the children. Rook had told me the truth. It was enough to make me wonder whether we'd be taking the test with our families present.

This kingdom is weird sometimes.

As the Ho family carriage joined the flock, many of the adults seemed to look our way. Our carriage—which proudly displayed our family's crest on its side—was so polished that it sparkled. I felt like I was the center of attention.

When our carriage came to a stop before the front entrance to the building, the coachman hopped off and opened the carriage doors. As our family of three climbed out, those around us became noticeably quieter.

Their rapt attention was either confirmation of the Ho family's prestigious nature, or they had strange ideas about Rook's rise to power despite his lack of knighthood and unconventional career path. If anything, it felt like they weren't looking upon us kindly. In either case, it was yet another headache-inducing concern about my future.

Rook must have grown used to this over the past three years because it had

no effect on him—he took it in his stride as he escorted Suzuya toward the building.

I followed behind them.

We entered a large brick structure that looked like some sort of university building. Inside, we found a large lobby with female receptionists.

“Rook Ho, and this is my son, Yuri,” Rook told the receptionist.

“I see. Someone will soon guide you to the exam hall. Lord Rook and Lady Suzuya, please wait in the family reception room.”

She even knew Suzuya by name.

In almost no time at all, a beautiful woman appeared. “Please allow me to guide the way.”

Apparently, she was going to take me to the exam room, and I’d be separated from my parents for a while.

“Give it your best shot, Yuri,” Rook said.

“We’re rooting for you,” Suzuya added.

My parents smiled as they waved goodbye to me.

Jeez. You’d think it was a college entrance exam.

The woman walked briskly through the busy corridors and led me into the room that served as the exam hall.

I soon noticed that something was odd. It wasn’t because the room was filled with boys about the same age as me—that much was expected. The weird thing was that the test had already started.

Twenty to thirty children sat at a long table that looked like something from a college lecture theater. They were deep in thought as they wrote on pieces of wood. Employees—some male, some female—stood beside each one.

I even saw one child finish his test. He stopped writing and submitted his piece of wood before leaving the room.

What’s going on here? It’s hardly fair if we don’t all start at the same time. Isn’t there a time limit? And what if someone heads outside and tells someone

else what the questions are? We're supposed to wait until everyone's in the same room before we all start at once. This can't be right.

Still confused over the whole process, I took a seat. A piece of wood, an inkwell, and a quill were placed on the tabletop in front of me.

The wood was light-colored, with only a few questions on it and no space to write my own name. They must have thought parchment would be wasted on us.

I'd been getting myself worked up like this was an entrance exam, but that had all been over nothing.

The exam was as follows, with only ten questions:

1: State the name of our country.

2: State the name of the neighboring country.

3: What is 12×3 ?

4: Show the directions north, east, south, and west, with north pointing upward.

5: State the queen's name.

Read the following passage before answering the questions below.

Black had a big spear, but that spear was stolen. When the stolen spear was sold, White received a lot of money. White used the money to buy medicine for Blue, who was sick. Black punched White when he found him. When Black saw Blue's condition, he forgave White.

6: Who stole Black's spear?

7: Why did White want money?

8: Why did Black hit White?

9: Why did Black forgive White?

10: Name three colors besides black, white, and blue.

These are way too easy... Did I really spend three years studying for this? I studied like I was preparing for college exams, but now it feels like they've just pulled the rug out from under me. Someone's gonna pay for this...

Feeling awfully empty, I wrote an answer for each question.

It took me just a minute or two before I declared, "I'm finished."

"Already?" The guide looked at my piece of wood to make sure all of the questions had been answered. "Oh. Very well. Please come with me."

She took me to the front of the room. There was an old woman there who looked like a teacher.

"State your name and present your answers," the old teacher said.

"Yuri Ho. I've finished all the questions."

She took a look at my piece of wood and then, without pausing to grade it, said, "Take him to room one."

Someone beside her who seemed like a recordkeeper of sorts began writing. I saw him add "Yuri Ho" to a list of names.

What's this all about?

"Please come with me."

I followed the female guide out of the room, completely clueless. She led me into a different room that was much smaller than the previous one. Five or so children were already here.

"Please wait here."

The guide gave me a polite bow as if to say that her business with me was over. She turned and took a few steps toward the door we'd just entered through—she was going to leave me.

What's even happening?

"Wait, please," I called to her. "What is all this? What's this room?"

The guide looked back over her shoulder at me.

"You weren't told? It's the exam hall."

Huh? If this is the exam, then what was that first test?

“But I thought I just finished the exam.”

A look of understanding came over the guide’s face. “Oh, that was the simpler preliminary test. The real one is still to come.”

Huh? Oh... Now I get it.

Everything made sense after a little thought. Since there was so much variation in everyone’s academic ability, a simple exam was being used to get a rough idea of the classes first before giving a level-appropriate test. That was why we’d simply used wood and started at different times. The first test really would’ve been a waste of parchment—the pieces of wood could simply be shaved and reused.

I’d been wondering why the guides had remained near the children and waited for them to finish the exam, but now I knew it was no more than a brief stop along the way. It made sense that it had been over so quickly.

“I understand now. I’m sorry. I wasn’t aware of this arrangement.”

“It’s no problem.” The guide gave me a brief bow and then actually left the room.

I should’ve guessed that’s how it is, but I would’ve gone on thinking that was the real exam if no one had told me.

My guess was that Rook or someone else was supposed to have explained the process to me in advance.

Well, never mind. I’ll just wait for the exam now.



I’d been sitting there for thirty minutes, but the long-awaited real exam still hadn’t started. At that point, it occurred to me that we’d have to wait for everyone to be finished with the preliminary test before we could start the real one. Maybe some participants were putting a ton of time into each answer, or maybe Rook had just brought me to the venue way too early.

As I waited, the number of children steadily increased. They were still fewer than I’d expected, though, especially given how many had entered the venue.

I'd thought a good number of children would score full marks on the first test given how easy the questions had been. Maybe this room wasn't just for anyone who got ninety percent or above—we were just those who'd answered every question right.

It would be another thirty minutes before the final student arrived in the room.

The kids in the room were talking among themselves and getting to know one another when someone who looked like a teacher and a girl around my age entered the room.

The girl's hair was blonde. The only other time I'd ever seen a blonde-haired person since the day of my rebirth was back when I'd first visited the royal capital to accompany Rook on a delivery. The girl I'd met then was Carol, and she was set to be the next queen.

I couldn't be sure that this was the same girl, even though I had a good view of her face from where I sat. I guess that wasn't surprising, as I hadn't seen her since I was around four years old.

The way all the other children stared at her seemed to confirm that blonde hair really was a rarity. For most of them, this must have been their first time seeing hair like hers.

I examined her again and sensed a cleverness about her, but she also seemed rather unfriendly. It was probably because her face was a little stiff with stress.

The girl sat directly in front of me. She didn't bother to introduce herself, so I still couldn't be sure who she really was.

In any case, she must be the last student. I sure hope so, anyhow.

"I will now give out your answer sheets," the teacher announced before giving everyone a slip of parchment with exam problems on it.

Great. It's finally starting.

Eventually, I was given one too.

Once I'm done, I'll be able to head home for the day. Let's just get it over with.

The sheets were given out face up, so I studied the questions. A brief skim

over them made my eyes go wide.

Whoa.

The first problem was about a piece of terminology that I'd seen written in a military handbook I'd read back at the Ho family manor—a book that was similar to Sun Tzu's. It simply asked for a definition without giving any explanation. Needless to say, anyone who hadn't read that military handbook wouldn't be able to answer it. Granted, it was a famous book, but how many kids could there possibly be who'd read a difficult military book written for adults?

Neither Rook nor Satsuki had mentioned anything, but perhaps it was like a foundation text that all examinees were supposed to read.

Next, there was an essay question about maneuvers employed on the battlefield.

I'd have failed two questions already if I hadn't read that one book, but I would've only lost about twenty points out of one hundred.

The questions weren't all about military matters. One featured a picture of a right-angled triangle with the length of the two adjacent sides given. It asked me to derive the length of the hypotenuse, which required knowledge of the Pythagorean theorem and at least an elementary understanding of squaring to solve. The answer was a whole number because the other two sides that formed the right angle had lengths of 5 and 12, but it was still a tough problem for a ten-year-old.

There was also a geography question which asked me to name all of the nations that formed with the collapse and break up of the Shantila Empire. We'd been asked to name the neighboring kingdom in the preliminary exam, so all the kids here should have at least been able to name two, but I doubted many would've memorized all nine.

There was a fairly difficult reading comprehension question that required us to analyze a passage about how Gojoran—one of the nine kingdoms—had collapsed very quickly following a diplomatic incident. And of course, there were essay questions too. I wondered how many people here could write on the level demanded.

My brief inspection suggested that this was a difficult set of problems. But once I'd finished scanning, I realized that something was conspicuously absent.

You're kidding me—there isn't a single question on Ancient Shanish here.

"You have until all the sand in this hourglass has fallen. Now begin." The teacher watching over us turned over a large hourglass.

If there's no question on Ancient Shanish, does that mean I don't need to study it at the Knight Academy? But then why would Satsuki put me through all that...? Wait...don't tell me she knew I wouldn't have a chance to learn it here. Is that why she made me go through all those spartan efforts to learn nothing but Ancient Shanish toward the end? Did she deliberately neglect to inform me that it wouldn't be on the exam—or in any of the Knight Academy's courses—because she knew I'd lose all motivation to learn it? Was that her game all along? That's not even funny. Doesn't it count as abuse?

I was in such shock that it took me around five minutes to come to my senses.

There was no use crying over spilled milk. I picked up the quill and set to work on the questions.



I must've taken about an hour to finish every question. Some of them were pretty tough, but I had an answer for each one.

That said, no matter how tough they were, they were still questions for ten-year-olds, so it'd be embarrassing if I couldn't answer them at all.

I sighed to myself. Now that I'd finished the exam, I was getting irritated again. I remembered all the stress that rote memorization had caused me. I'd honestly believed Satsuki when she repeatedly told me, "You'll bring shame on yourself if you don't even get the basic education that all cultured people have." I'd worked so hard at it.

I'd give Satsuki a piece of my mind right now if she hadn't stayed behind in Ho Province. Damn. Now I see why she stayed away.

Still seething, I looked ahead and noticed that not even half of the sand in the hourglass had fallen. That meant that we had about two and a half hours in

total to finish the exam.

I picked up my answer sheet and quietly headed toward the front while trying not to disturb anyone. I reached the teacher's desk and held my answer sheet out to her without a word.

"You still have time left," the teacher said in a soft, but accusatory tone.

"Am I unable to leave until the time runs out?" I whispered back at her.

I was going to be really bored if she made me stay. It would mean I'd be waiting here for over an hour without being able to make a sound.

"You're free to leave. But you can't return once you do."

Oh. That's a relief.

"I think I've answered every question, so I'd like to go."

I presented her with my answer sheet and then quickly left the room.

I got a little lost on the way back, but I vaguely remembered the route. Along the way I was fortunate enough to find a staff member who directed me toward the room where the families were waiting.

The smell of booze hit me the moment I entered. *This is the waiting room? It's more like a party room.*

The large hall—it was definitely a party room—hosted a buffet-style meal with a wide variety of dishes and alcohol that the guests could help themselves to.

Oh, so that's how it is? Families say they're here to offer support, but this is what's going on behind the scenes, huh? While their kids are working hard, the parents are getting drunk at a banquet. Unbelievable. Well, I suppose they all graduated from here. I guess it's like a casual gathering back at one of their old hangouts.

I walked around for a while before I finally located Rook. To my disbelief, I found him arm wrestling with Galla on a small round table.

Suzuya was with him, but she stood a little further back. She was smiling in an attempt to look calm about it, but she wasn't fooling anyone—although her

mouth curved up, her grin didn't extend up to her eyes. Her anger with her husband was quite clear. In normal circumstances, she probably would've slapped him across the head, but I guess that wasn't an option at a formal gathering like this. She should've just pinched his backside without letting anyone notice.

"Father, what are you doing...?" I asked in an astounded voice.

"Ngh?! Ah... Yuri? I'm—"

The strength must've left him the moment he saw my face, because he instantly lost the arm wrestling contest. The back of his hand hit the table with a thud.

"Youch." He shook his hand like it had hurt. "You don't go easy, do you?"

"Blame yourself for relaxing," Galla laughed.

"What happened to your exam, Yuri?"

"I finished it."

I looked around and noticed that the banquet was still in full swing. I was the only child there, so there couldn't have been many children who'd left their exams early like me.

"I expected it to go on for another hour."

"It will. That's why I didn't wait."

"I hope you took it seriously," he said in a concerned voice.

Rude. I'm taking things more seriously than you.

"Don't worry. I can't promise I'll get a perfect score, but I gave it my all."

"Okay. I suppose that's all right then."

I was expecting him to tell me that I should've kept at it until the very last second, but he must've had faith in my intelligence because he didn't argue.

"Hey, Yuri, it's been a while," Galla said to me.

I'd grown quite a lot since the last time I'd met Galla, but I wasn't the only one—he was more muscular than ever.

“Nice to see you again, Galla,” I said with a bow of my head.

“You answered all the questions already?”

“That’s correct.”

“You might’ve been in the same exam room as my son. Did you see him?”

“It’s possible, but I’m not sure because there were a lot of children.”

“I guess. Be a friend to him if you do see him. He’s not like you, he’s an unruly brat.”

Ugh... Sounds like a pain.

Even Galla’s formal attire couldn’t hide how burly he was, so that unruly brat of his would be a real handful if he’d inherited his dad’s muscles.

“An unruly brat? That sounds scary, but I do hope I can get along with him.” I didn’t really mean what I was saying.

“Make sure you give him what for if he gets out of line.”

Do it yourself instead of forcing other people to discipline your rotten son! I wanted to retort. Instead, I asked, “What’s your son’s name?”

“Dolla Godwin.”

Dolla? Got it. Galla’s son Dolla. That’s easy to remember.

“I’ll make sure I don’t forget it.”

I’m staying far away from that kid.

I turned to Rook. “Well then, father. Can we go home?”

“Huh? Home?”

That’s not what I wanted to hear. He must want to keep eating and drinking.

“Is there a ceremony or something after this?” I asked.

“No, but...”

“Then we should go home. Look, mother doesn’t look particularly well.”

I glanced over at Suzuya. It wasn’t that she looked unwell—if anything, she looked a little threatening. But that had the same effect.

“And I have to admit that the exam left me quite tired,” I continued.

“O-Oh. I suppose we’ll go back then,” Rook said reluctantly. He must have sensed danger when he looked at Suzuya. “See you around, Galla.”

“Sure. Keep working hard.”

“We’re sorry to leave so soon, but please excuse us,” I told him.

“Farewell, Sir Galla.” Suzuya gripped her skirt and lowered her head in the standard female curtsy.

That really doesn’t suit her... It looks wrong when she does it...

After we’d boarded our carriage and returned to our residence, I had dinner and went to bed without further incident. The admission ceremony would happen tomorrow.



Family members could attend the admission ceremony too, so the three of us boarded the carriage just like the day before.

I’d been intently staring out of the window from the carriage yesterday, trying to memorize the streets of the city where I’d be spending the next ten years or so. But when I did the same today, I noticed that we seemed to be traveling by different roads.

“Are we taking a different route than yesterday?” I asked.

“Didn’t I tell you? The admission ceremony takes place at the royal castle,” Rook replied.

Nope, no one told me that.

“The royal castle? Will Her Majesty be there?”

“Of course. The academy’s students are Shiyalta’s future.”

Wow, okay. I suppose even in Japan, the prime minister attends the admission ceremony at the National Defense Academy. This must be a similar thing.

Today wasn’t just the admission ceremony, I’d be assigned a room in the dormitory in the afternoon too. A dorm room wasn’t strictly necessary for me because the Ho family had a residence in the royal capital, but ordinary knight

families didn't have second homes here. For most students, living in the dorm was the only option. It would have beds for us all, so everyone would have a place there. Whether we actually used it or not was a matter of individual choice.

"Haaah..." I was feeling so down that I wanted to turn truant before I'd even started.

"You're sighing again?" Rook noted in disbelief.

I didn't think he'd hear that...

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be... I'm just surprised. I didn't think you'd mind so much. I thought you'd be excited to be out in the royal capital."

"I'm going to be lonely while I'm away from you two."

I felt genuine love for Rook and Suzuya, so I replied honestly. Given how my parents had been in Japan, it felt like this had been my first experience of parental affection.

"And I'm not sure I'll be able to make friends," I added.

I can't imagine being best buds with a brat my own age.

I hadn't made many friends even when I'd been an actual child, and I hadn't gotten along well enough with anyone to maintain contact after graduation.

"I'm sure you'll make a friend or two quite easily, Yuri. You got along with Sham, didn't you?"

She's a special case. She's so smart that I actually enjoy teaching her, and she has a lot of respect for me too. It's easy to get along with her, but I know she's one of a kind.

"I know that you'll miss us, Yuri, but this is something you have to do," Suzuya told me.

"Yes, mom," I made sure to sound cheerful.

"Do your best. D-Do...y-your..." she whimpered, suddenly breaking down into tears.

Huh? M-Mom?

“D-Do your...b-best...” she sobbed.

“S-Suzuya? We’re not saying a final farewell or anything, you know?” Rook hurriedly tried to reassure her.

“B-But...w-we won’t see...Y-Yuri as much...”

The thought of not seeing her son is enough to make her cry?

“That’s true, but he won’t be locked away somewhere. We can visit him whenever we want to. I’ll take you to the royal capital whenever you like.”

“Y-You mean it...?”

“Of course I do. Right, Yuri?” Rook looked at me.

S-Sure.

“Of course, mom. I’d be lonely too if you never visited. And I’ll be able to ride eagles by myself before long, so I’ll be able to come visit you.”

“Th-That’s a...relief. Remember, you can come home anytime if you don’t like it. You don’t have to push yourself.”

Ugh. She’s so good to me. It’s making me want to cry.

“All right. If I hate it, I’ll do as you say and come home.”

“That’s good... I’m sorry for being such a hopeless mother.”

A hopeless mother? You couldn’t be further from it.

“You’re not hopeless. You’re my amazing mom. I promise I’ll come to visit you.”

It was the first time I’d ever consoled her like this. I struggled to hold back the tears as I felt my emotions well up inside of me.

II

We left the highway, entered Royal Castle Island, and stopped our carriage in front of the castle.

The island was like a fortress in itself, so there was no wall around the castle. If this had been a traditional Japanese castle, we would've had to make our way through the defenses set up within the outer walls before we reached the building itself. However, the castle was much more accessible here.

It also had windows that looked low enough for an adult to break them by hand, and to make matters worse, there were engravings near the ground level that made great footholds for anyone who wanted to try to scale the side of the building. And as beautiful as the wide-open front gate looked, it wasn't reinforced with any iron plates or rivets. This place wouldn't hold out if an enemy army reached it; it practically invited them to show themselves in. It was more like a palace than a castle.

But a palace built this tall would make for an inconvenient place to live—a square, flat structure that prioritized living arrangements over defenses might've been more appropriate. Maybe they'd built it this way for the sake of creating a landmark. It certainly was stunning, and its height made it ideal for looking down over the rest of the capital, giving the city residents a sense that the queen was always watching over them. It might've helped to establish her authority.

The royal capital of Sibiak had been invaded several times in its history, but Royal Castle Island's defenses had held out each time. Given that the castle hadn't been the source of actual problems, it may have been ideal for this country.

We disembarked from the carriage and headed into the castle via a large door formed by a single slab of wood. It had been created from some great tree and decorated with fine engravings. Once we were inside, we joined a procession of other attendees.

I'd entered castles and palaces during my travels in the past, but this was my first time seeing one in active use. Knowing that the queen lived and received guests here gave the place a strange feel.

We passed through a front entrance and into a sort of entrance hall. A beautiful woman dressed in sleek formal attire greeted us.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you the Ho family?"

"That's us," Rook replied.

"Would you allow your son to come with me?"

Huh? Don't tell me she's a kidnapper.

"Why?" Rook mustn't have been informed about this. He was suspicious of this woman who'd just asked to take his only son without any warning.

"Please allow me to explain," the woman said before she moved in close to Rook's ear and whispered something to him.

Suzuya's eyes narrowed a little as if she had a few things to say about Rook's infidelity.

"Oh. Really?" Rook said.

"Indeed. That's why..."

"I get it. Yuri, you go with her."

What? And let her kidnap me?

"Why—" I began to protest.

"Don't worry about it," Rook interrupted. "You'd better hurry. Families and students don't sit together anyway. Let her guide you."

"Well, all right then."

If my dad says so, I'll have to just follow her.

We moved through the crowd and entered a side corridor. Soon, we'd left everyone else behind.

Not knowing what was happening made me nervous.

Eventually, she led me into a fairly impressive-looking room. I suppose that wasn't a surprise given that it was part of the royal castle. The sofas, carpets, and hanging pictures were all first-rate. It was just as splendid as the finest guest room back at the Ho manor in Kalakumo.

"Now, please excuse me." With her job finished, the woman left.

The room wasn't empty. An old man and woman—who might've been a married couple—sat on a pair of fancy chairs. There was also the blonde girl I'd

seen in the exam room the day before. The four of us made a good balance, but I had a bad feeling about it all.

“You must be Yuri Ho,” the old woman said.

“Yes.”

“Sit down.”

She must be someone important if she can just boss me around like that. Maybe she’s an academy teacher.

I walked over to the sofa and sat down as I’d been told; I wanted to stay in her good graces.

“I’m the Cultural Academy’s director, Isabeau Marmoset.”

“And I’m the Knight Academy’s director, Revelo Rube,” the old man said.

Oh, okay.

The Marmoset family was the most prominent of the seven witches. And Rube was one of the largest chieftain families in the kingdom—the five families were often simply referred to as the five chieftains.

Since the Rube family was one of a handful of chieftain families, they were on the same level as the Ho family. Their province directly bordered Kilhina, so it stood out to me as an area that drew a lot of attention. If Kilhina fell, Rube’s territory would be the next in line to be crushed.

I’d memorized the names of the heads of all twelve collective families while studying, so I knew that Isabeau and Revelo weren’t them. Each was perhaps a sibling of the head, or another close relative—like an aunt or uncle. Having a member of the Marmoset family as the Cultural Academy’s director was impressive.

“I’m Yuri Ho,” I introduced myself.

The girl beside me gave her name too. “Carol Flue Shaltl.”

Now I knew that it was the same girl from back then. Shaltl had been the surname of the imperial family of the Shantila Empire. The Flue in her name was an Ancient Shanish word that meant “four.”

The last empress of the Shantila Empire had birthed twelve daughters—could you imagine? Three of those had died in the chaos following the empire’s downfall, while the surviving nine went on to create their own nations, the nine kingdoms born of the empire’s collapse.

Those nine daughters prefixed the name Shaltl with numbers to indicate who was born first, and they became queens of their respective kingdoms. In other words, Shiyalta’s royal family was descended from the fourth eldest of the empress’s daughters. The royal family of neighboring Kilhina had used the name Toni Shaltl for generations, and they were descended from the youngest—the twelfth—of the daughters.

The girl looked straight at me as if she were struggling to remember where she’d seen my face, but she soon looked away again. Perhaps it was just her natural expression, but it had almost felt like she’d glared at me.

Being stared at by a girl with such pretty features gave me a strange feeling that I was in trouble for something.



“Yuri and Carol, you have both been chosen as top students, and you’ll have special roles to play during the admission ceremony.”

This old bag couldn’t be for real. My head spun.

Why make me go through all this now? The admission ceremony itself is trouble enough.

“We have an hour until the ceremony begins. In that time, I’d like us to perform a brief rehearsal. You’ll have to memorize a speech, learn the proper way to conduct yourself, and various other things.”

“Please, wait a moment. I understand why you chose Her Highness, but why me?”

Is it because of the family I’m from?

“Because of your exam grade,” the old man told me.

I gave up arguing. There wasn’t much I could say if it was based on my performance.

Figures I'd be the top student. I probably got close to a perfect score. I should've gotten a question or two wrong on purpose. Too late now...

"But isn't Her Highness the top student? Aren't I just the runner-up?"

I saw the princess taking the Knight Academy exam. We can't both be in first place. Maybe we got the same score?

"Carol is the top student in the Cultural Academy."

Huh? But she took the Knight Academy exam. Or did she take both? Was the Knight Academy just her backup plan?

"Yuri, you're the Knight Academy's top student," he explained. "Carol is the Cultural Academy's top student. It's that simple. And I'll warn you now for the sake of your future here: keep your questions to yourself until you've been given permission to ask them. I won't tolerate this at the Knight Academy."

Now I was getting lectured. I decided I'd better drop the subject.

Grrr...

We headed into another parlor room where a female teacher appeared and gave us scripts.

"Memorize it," she demanded.

Damn. Why put me through a trial like this when I don't want to be here in the first place? What did I do to deserve this punishment?

"I've memorized it." Carol handed her script back before even five minutes had passed.

Wow. That's some memory she's got.

She glanced over at me.

"Hmpf." It sounded like a proud chuckle.



Well, that's kinda cute. She's really pleased with herself. But I'll take my time. I'm not great at memorizing things, and if I embarrass myself it'll reflect badly on Rook. Let's see...

"We vow, as we enter into the academy...with integrity...to learn the true character of a knight, and devote ourselves to our studies in anticipation of the day that we may take up arms for our queen," I whispered out loud to myself.

Why's it have to be so long? It's sooo looong.

I spent a good ten minutes committing it to memory.

It's ridiculous that they expect me to remember all this just an hour before the ceremony. What's wrong with this country's education system? Do they have no common sense?

"I think I'll remember it now." I handed the script back.

"Good. Now, let's begin. I'll explain the procedure," the old woman said.

Phew. Finally, we can practice. There's not a whole lot of time left.

"When it's announced that representative students will make their pledges, the two of you will rise from your seats and walk toward the stage. Yuri, you'll sit near the stage on the left side, and Carol, you'll be sitting on the right. Both of you will approach the stage at the same time. You'll begin by rising, facing Her Majesty, and bowing. Then you'll come to a stop before ascending the stairs. Next, you'll turn to face the audience and bow to them as well. Once you're on the stage, you'll both walk over to Her Majesty. Yuri will give a respectful kneeling bow in the standard indoor style. Carol, please give Her Majesty a respectful bow in the style reserved for family members, as you would normally. Then, you'll both rise and make your pledges, with Yuri going first. When you've both finished your speeches, Her Majesty will offer an extended hand to Yuri, so Yuri will go down on one knee and lightly place his lips to the back of Her Majesty's hand. With that finished, you'll both rise, bow to the audience once more, and return to your seats."

Looong. I'm gonna pass out.

"Now, let's begin. Forgive my audacity, but I'll play the role of Her Majesty. Sit

down over there.”

This was far more difficult than any punishment I could’ve imagined. I couldn’t help but tremble.

It’s so long...



“Hmpf. You’re not so special, are you?”

No sooner than we’d finished a successful rehearsal, Her Royal Highness began hurling abuse at me.

What’s wrong with her? She scares me. She was such a good little girl the first time I met her. These past six years must’ve really warped her personality.

With the rehearsal over, we were supposed to return to the event hall. Basically, we’d been thrown out of the parlor and left to make our own way back.

I really don’t get it. What did I say to make her mad at me? Did I do something wrong?

“You’re right. I know I’m not all that.”

If anything, I’m low-life trash. Well, I’ve told her what she wants to hear. Groveling beats having the royal family for an enemy.

But Carol came to a stop. “How can you say that? Do you think I’m stupid?!”

Huh? I didn’t say anything close to that...

“Uh? I... Ah?!” I didn’t even know how to react.

I’m sorr— Stupid in what way? Maybe she’s mistaking me for someone else?

“Don’t talk down to me just because you got a better exam grade.”

Huh? Ah, we both did the Knight Academy exam—that’s what it’s about. But what did I do to deserve this? Jeez.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why did you take the Knight Academy exam?”

“Hmpf,” Carol huffed, suddenly looking proud of herself. Her face seemed to say, *well, I’m glad you asked!*

“I’m going to graduate from the Knight Academy *and* the Cultural Academy. My original plan was to be the top student for both schools.”

Oh? Can she do that? You don’t just stay at the Knight and Cultural academies as a kid. You’d normally keep going until you’re over twenty. It’s like attending a college for humanities and a science at the same time.

“Wow... That’s amazing. Well, give it your best.”

“I don’t need your encouragement.”

Sounds like she’s giving it her best already. I suppose she’ll never graduate at all without that kind of enthusiasm. Hopefully, she leaves me out of it.

“Oh, all right,” I replied.

“But where’s your ambition? Hold your head up high.”

I’m not sure what she expects from me...

“I’m not really into any of this,” I confessed.

“Huh?!” Her expression could’ve been used as a textbook example for shock.

“I don’t even want to study here. If I’d known the top student position existed, I’d have let you have it. I’m sorry that I didn’t.”

I gave her a brief bow of my head. The moment I looked up again, three things happened in quick succession—I heard a *smack*, I felt something hit my face, and my cheek grew hot.

Huh? Did she just slap me?

“You...blackguard!” Princess Carol yelled at me, her face red with rage. Apparently, that wasn’t enough, because she continued, “You...idiot, moron, fool...um...dumb idiot!”

With that, she ran off. She’d probably run out of insults.





I would've put something cold on my cheek to stop it from swelling up, but there was no time. I was past the point of caring, so I headed straight to the event hall.

The event hall—the great hall, if you will—was a huge room. I'd once read about this room in a book, and as you might expect from a room famous enough to be written about, it was a stunning space filled with gorgeous decorations. There were geometric patterns carved onto the ceiling, and the whole thing appeared to have been gilded with gold. It was rather dull though, its color faded with age. I wasn't sure if it had been intended to be like this, or if they simply hadn't had the time to redo it.

Chairs were lined up on the cosmetic stone floor, and a narrow carpet ran down the center. The carpet was another remarkable item with half-and-half dying that made it blue on the right side and red on the left. It reminded me of Baron Ashura from a certain robot anime. But unlike Ashura, the male side was to the left, so I headed there.

I made my way through the crowded hall and found my allotted seat—the farthest one at the front row. Finally, I could rest.

What was up with that sassy brat? There's no way I deserved to be treated like that.

Someone sat down to my right and spoke to me without warning. "Nice to meet you, Yuri."

I turned to see a pretty-faced boy—his face was too round and his features too cute to be called handsome—who was quite small compared to me. His chestnut hair was cut in a soft bob.

I'll bet any woman with a thing for younger boys would be all over this one. Who is he?

"Nice to meet you too," I replied.

And how does this guy know my name?

"My name is Myalo Gudinveil," he said.

The surname “Gudinveil” was one of the seven witches. That made him the family’s highborn son, but to witch families, a boy was like a Holstein Friesian bull. Based on what I’d heard, they recognized competent men as useful tools, but their social standing was another matter. In fact, I’d been told that boys from high-ranking witch families rarely, if ever, aimed to join the royal guard, so they were seldom seen at the Knight Academy.

I’d better rein in my curiosity and introduce myself.

“I’m Yuri Ho.”

Myalo chuckled. “What happened to your cheek?” he asked, looking amused.

He didn’t appear to be laughing *at* me, nor did he sound rude. His ability to ask the question in just the right way might’ve been a talent.



I rubbed my cheek. It still stung. *How do I explain this?*

"I was slapped after tripping and accidentally touching a lady's rear," I lied without much thought.

There's no shortage of women who'd slap a brat who tried to touch their butt. I'd say I fell down the stairs, but he can probably see the outline of her fingers.

"Oh, that sounds terrible."

"It happens all the time."

No sooner than I spoke the words, I thought, *What am I even saying? I'd never get away with doing that all the time! I'd get more than a slap.*

"Oh, really? Sounds like you lead a very interesting life," Myalo said with a broad smile.

I doubted he bought my lie, but he appeared to enjoy hearing it regardless. Since I had nothing else to do, I was also glad to have someone to talk to.

"Not really. I'm just your average guy."

I figured it was best to come across as humdrum as possible. I didn't want people to take a weird interest in my life.

"Your average guy' never wins the place of top student," Myalo noted in a humorless tone.

Never? All right, I suppose not... I felt something like a flash of realization. *Oh, I get it now. It all makes sense. So that's why Carol was mad.*

I'd surpassed her by claiming the top place, but then I'd downplayed the achievement in a way that had only injured her pride. I realized that a ten-year-old like Carol must've had to work incredibly hard to be able to answer those exam questions. Doing well in the preliminary exam would've been enough for her to avoid embarrassment, but she'd continued to study until she could handle the unreasonably difficult main exam...only to be outdone by an apathetic kid who didn't even want to be there in the first place.

From my perspective, she'd looked irrationally angry, but she'd actually had a good reason for it, especially considering she was only ten.

“Someone who’s just a little smart can’t really call themselves exceptional. What really matters is what we do with our lives.”

I was far from amazing. After all, I was just a regular guy who’d lived for a long time. I was essentially cheating and accidentally getting in the way of genuinely talented children in the process. There was nothing more to it.

“That’s true, but it’s too soon to say. We’re both still young,” Myalo replied.

Sadly, I’m not young at all. I’ve learned my worth already. But I’m not going to say that out loud.

“You’re right.” I gave a minimal response.

“Silence!” a voice rang out through the hall.



The higher-ups gave us some long-winded speeches, then they called for pledges from the student representatives.

I stood up and headed for the stage, bowing twice along the way like I was supposed to. I took to the stage alongside Carol. Her Majesty was sitting right in front of me.

She was a slender woman who looked just a little older than Satsuki—maybe in her midthirties, although she may have easily been closer to fifty given how young Shanti people looked. She shared the same blonde hair and blue eyes as Carol; both traits must have run in the royal family. Much to my relief, Her Majesty examined Carol like a parent studying her own child for signs of growth. It would’ve been hard to bear if she’d studied the mysterious boy with a swollen cheek instead.

“Bow down!”

As the order was given, I put one knee on the ground and placed my hand on the other knee. Then I balled the other hand into a fist that I placed against the floor. This was a respectful bow used by men indoors in Shanti culture.

Placing a fist against the floor symbolized offering up one’s spear. Since the action could result in a dirty fist if the ground was muddy, men would generally place their hand to their chest when bowing outdoors instead.

Beside me, Carol went down on one knee and placed a hand—the same one that I'd rested on my knee—across her chest. Her other hand was out of sight.

When greeting the queen in a situation like this, women would normally take the hand that wasn't on their chest and rest it on the floor before the queen, with the palm facing upward. It had originated as a show of reverence toward the imperial family, so it would have been strange for Carol—the queen's own daughter—to make that particular gesture.

We stood up and faced the queen once more.

The Knight Academy speech came first. I read out the words I'd memorized, loud and clear.

“...and devote ourselves to our studies in anticipation of the day that we may take up arms for our queen.”

After everything I'd just been through, I thought I might've forgotten it, but somehow I still remembered my pledge and recited it without any problems. If I *had* forgotten anything, I probably could've just ad-libbed my way through it. It wasn't as though the audience knew what I was supposed to say. The main thing was to recite it without any pauses. The content wasn't particularly meaningful anyway.

Next was Carol's turn. She began to speak. She'd memorized it well, so she was able to recite it flawlessly in a clear, confident voice.

Wow.

“We vow that we shall always be at Her Majesty's call and ever devoted, so that...uh...”

Huh?

Just when she was ninety percent finished, she came to a complete stop.

I thought she might've suddenly died after being hit with a Level 5 Death spell, so I turned my head sideways to look at her. Carol's face was pale, and her mouth flapped open and closed pitifully.

She forgot it...

Our eyes met. It felt like a cry for help.

Looking at me won't solve anything. I'd love to help, but I only heard your speech once in rehearsal. Obviously I don't remember it... Actually, I think this part might've gone something like, "We vow that we shall always be at Her Majesty's call and ever devoted, so that we may support her in her endeavors, carry out her bidding, and rejoice with her when she rejoices." Why do I even remember this?

"...So that we may support her in her endeavors," I whispered to Carol.

"Oh! ...So that we may support her in her endeavors, carry out her bidding, and rejoice with her when she rejoices!"

She got there in the end. Good for her. Great job.

When we'd both finished, Her Majesty extended a hand toward me.

Was I supposed to do something? Oh yeah, I remember.

I went down on one knee, took her hand, and touched it to my lips. As I drew my lips away, I opened my hand as softly as someone releasing a butterfly, and slowly climbed up to my feet.

At the same time, Carol gave one more standing bow, and then we left the stage.



The admission ceremony had ended without incident.

I couldn't help but sigh. "Phew..."

Now what's next? Oh yeah, we're going to be shown the dormitory, right?

The dorms were a long way from Royal Castle Island. Naturally, they were within the academy grounds, and the sprawling academy certainly wasn't contained on this small island. We had a fair distance to travel.

"You put on a good show as our representative," Myalo said to me amid the din of other students.

"It wasn't all that."

"I hope I can get to know you better at the dormitory."

"Yeah. It'd be nice if we're in the same room."

“Sadly, the top five students are always in different rooms. That’s the rule. We’re expected to lead our roommates toward enlightenment.”

How’s he know all this? Well, it sounds like Myalo ranked within the top five. I doubt two of the top students would randomly end up sitting next to each other given how many of us there are, so the seats must’ve been ordered by exam grade. The kids in the back row can’t have liked that.

Since Myalo sat beside me, he’d probably come in third place. I would’ve been able to confirm this if Carol had sat with us, but of course, she couldn’t be at both sides without learning some kind of ninja clone technique. Still, I could tell just from how Myalo spoke that he was a smart guy. It was possible that he’d beaten Carol and achieved second place.

“Really? That’s a shame. Seriously.”

I could already tell that the two of us were going to get along.

“But perhaps we could eat lunch together?” Myalo suggested. He was inviting me out already.

“Lunch...?”

“We don’t enter the dorm until this afternoon. Most people will be getting something to eat beforehand.”

So that’s the arrangement? I’m glad someone told me. There’s always so much Rook neglects to mention. But what to do...? Maybe I’ll ask Rook if Myalo can join us... No, I really shouldn’t. Given the state Suzuya was in, I should keep it to just the three of us. And Rook’s so busy that he’ll have to head back home the day after tomorrow.

“I appreciate the invitation, but I won’t be seeing my parents for some time. I was hoping to enjoy a meal with just them.”

“Oh, all right. I’m sorry. I should have known that you’d traveled here from some place far off.” For some reason, he apologized to me.

Ah. He must live here in the capital. He’s a bureaucrat’s son, so his family probably works at the royal castle.

“Any other time I would’ve agreed. Sorry,” I told him.

“Don’t be.”

“We’ll have countless chances to eat together, I’m sure. Maybe next time.”

“Yes, you’re right. I look forward to it.”

Now I’d better find my dad.

I got up from my chair. I was about to wave to Myalo and walk off toward where the family members were gathered, but then I realized that someone was standing in my path. It was Carol.

What does she want now?

“Come with me,” Carol demanded, grabbing me by the wrist and trying to pull me away.

What’s her deal? Is she gonna take my lunch money behind the school?

“Hey,” I protested while resisting.

“What? Just do what I say.”

Don’t get mad at me...

“Hold up. I was just talking to a new friend. It’d be rude if I left without saying anything.”

“Hmph... Fine.” Carol released her grip on me.

“Sorry, Myalo, looks like I have to take care of this.”

“Yes, I can see that,” he replied with a smile. “You needn’t worry about me.”

“See you.”

“I’ll pray for your victory.”

Victory? Am I being dragged into a battle? My cheek still hurts from our last encounter.

“Are you done?” Carol asked.

She doesn’t have much patience, does she?

She dragged me along by the arm, knowing exactly where we’d find a room where she could talk to me alone—this was her home, after all. She marched

me to a small room where faint beams of sunlight shone through dusty air.

She appeared oddly frustrated, stuttering words like, “Um...” and, “Y-You...” before stopping. “It’s just...” she began again before pausing. Then, she let out a groan before going completely quiet.

What is she even trying to tell me?

As I waited patiently, Carol’s eyes began to tear up.

“Uh...ugh...” she sobbed.

Wh-Whoa, wait. What’s all this? What’s her goal here?

“Hey, don’t cry... What’s wrong?”

“It’s f-frustrating...” she stammered.

They’re tears of frustration? But why? I’ve got no idea what’s going on in her head. If she’s just frustrated because she lost to me on the exam, then why wait until now to start crying?

“What in the world are you frustrated over?” I asked.

“I’m n-not telling you...”

“Just say it.”

I successfully persuaded her into opening up a little, though she was still sobbing.

“I...twied to compete with you...and got humiliated... And then you took pity on me and helped me wemember my lines... And...”

Don’t tell me that when she handed her script back in just five minutes, she was trying to race with me to make up for losing on the exam? What a dumb thing to do. But she did manage to recite the whole thing perfectly during rehearsal, so she’d managed to memorize it for a while at least.

Carol had turned the whole thing into a pointless contest and humiliated herself in the process. I’d ended up pitying her as a result, which was why she was so embarrassed.

“Is that what you dragged me here to explain?”

I understood her frustration now, but her reason for bringing me here was still a mystery. Presumably, she wanted to talk something over, but I had no idea what.

“N-No... It’s...to thank you.”

Huh?

Carol wiped her tears with a handkerchief and then loudly blew her nose. “You might be an idiot, but you saved me... Thank you.”

“You’re...welcome.”

She just brought me here to say thanks? All right then. I get it.

“That’s all...” Carol said, then turned to leave.

I stopped her. “Wait up.”

“What?”

“I...owe you an apology too. I think I’ve been really insensitive.”

Carol glared at me as I admitted my guilt. “Why, pray tell, would you apologize?”

Why...?

“I think I injured your pride.”

“My pride’s quite intact!”

Then what’d you slap me for?

“Just thought I’d say something...”

“I was angry because you said you didn’t want to be at the academy. You’re a blackguard who lacks the dignity of a knight.”

She’s calling me a blackguard again. I don’t think I’ve been called that ever, past life included. Blackguard... It’s not a word you hear every day.

“Fine, maybe I am one, but you don’t know me or my problems,” I protested.

All I wanted was a slow, easy life as the head of a ranch. Now I’ve been forced here because of circumstances beyond my control and I need to be a dignified knight all of a sudden? Forget that.

“All that matters is that I’m not letting someone like you beat me. If I’m no better than a blackguard, I’ll bring shame on the title of queen.”

What’s this now?

“It doesn’t matter who’s better,” I said.

“Making excuses now?”

What are we even fighting over? And why, pray tell, am I stooping to a ten-year-old’s level to argue? Jeez, I’m even starting to sound like her.

“You’re going to be a queen, not a knight. A queen’s job is to make her subjects swear loyalty to her, but you’re competing with them to see who’s stronger and wiser instead.”

“The queen has to be stronger and wiser than anyone. Isn’t that obvious?”

“What a stupid thing to say. Are queens all superhumans?”

No matter who you are, you’re going to have some strengths and weaknesses. For one thing, if she’s the newest top student at the Cultural Academy, then she must be way better at Ancient Shanish than I am.

“Isn’t it a good thing if some of your subjects are wiser than you? Be happy about it.”

“I’m still not letting a blackguard beat me! Otherwise I must be even worse than a blackguard!”

“Ugh...”

Well, I don’t know how to argue with that one. If she thinks I’m trash, then I can’t deny it.

“Well...yeah, sure. Never give up,” I said.

“Don’t talk to me like that! Are you trying to say you’ll always be better than me?!”

How’d she reach that conclusion? I feel like she has a really warped perception of me.

“Is a fierce rivalry between us really necessary...? Well, whatever. I couldn’t care less about exams, so go ahead and outdo me if that’s what you want.”

I just wanna get out of here. All I've done is try hard on an exam, and now I'm getting dragged into a complicated argument over it.

"You..." she muttered.

"I'm not even trying. Work hard and you'll beat me sooner or later. So don't worry about..."

I'm just digging myself deeper here. I was trying to cool her down, but I'm just adding more fuel to the fire now. I think she's about to hit boiling point, but I just can't find the right words to cool her off. I wish I didn't suck so much at expressing myself.

"You trash! Moron! Filth! Um, uh, moron! Someone like you won't ever beat me!"

All my efforts were in vain—she'd exploded with rage. Her Royal Highness then went scampering out of the room.



"Where'd you go? We were looking for you."

Back in the event hall, Rook had been searching for me near where I'd been sitting.

"Sorry. Someone else caught me first. She's a difficult one to deal with."

It was worrying to think that this "someone" was the future queen of our kingdom. That said, she was still ten, so she had time to improve. By the time she reached twenty, she'd be far too important and sophisticated to worry about the likes of me. Hopefully.

"Difficult? Who? One of the academy's teachers?"

"No, just some girl I once met a long time ago," I said, trying to brush the incident off. I didn't want to give him a cause for concern.

"Well...you didn't waste any time," Rook quipped, grinning at me. "I don't mind if you see girls from the Cultural Academy... Just don't try messing around with one and then ditching her."

Clearly, he doesn't realize it was the princess. He must think it was some girl

from the Cultural Academy. And what's he mean by "ditch"?

"What do you mean?"

"All I'm saying is don't go messing around. That'll keep you safe as long as you don't do anything else improper. But if you fool around with a girl like that and then dump her, it'll mean trouble. You'll be the one expelled."

What? Expelled? Uhh... I'd rather not.

"If you *really* need to let off some steam, there's a brothel that's been a Knight Academy favorite for years now. It'll keep you out of trouble. You can ask the older students about it."

Is he serious? Does that really exist? And let me get this straight—when it comes to the exam, Rook leaves me completely in the dark, but he tells me about this when I didn't even ask. Is this what he considers important information?

"It's seven...maybe eight years too soon for me."

Sexual desire must've been more of a product of the body than the mind, because I didn't feel it in the slightest. And compared to Japan with all its miniskirts, everyone here was dressed so modestly that there was nothing that threatened to stir up that sort of desire. For the next few years, the only organ I'd be thinking with was my brain.

"Maybe," Rook agreed, "but if you wait until something happens, it'll be too late."

"Okay, but now's not the time or place. Could we talk about this back home?"

"Ah. Good point. Let's head back."

People were already making their way out of the hall, leaving the place much less crowded.

III

We returned to our residence and ate lunch together. Once we'd finished, I bid Suzuya another tearful goodbye. After that, I took my luggage—a collection

of things I'd brought from the manor in Ho Province and hadn't yet unpacked—and loaded it all onto a carriage. I was finally ready to set off.

"You're really leaving?" Sham asked between sniffles.

"Yes."

"Please don't go..."

She'd come to the royal capital with us, and now she was trying to win me over with tears. She'd recently turned nine, so she would attend the Cultural Academy the following year.

Sham had been in a perpetually foul mood ever since she'd learned that I'd be going away to join the Knight Academy. The only way to placate her had been to agree to let her move to the Ho residence in the capital where I'd visit her regularly.

Satsuki had gone back to Ho Province to fill in for Rook while he was away, but she normally spent long periods at the royal capital. Since Sham's mother would often be here, it wasn't such a bad place for her to be.

"Don't cry like that. It's not like you'll never see me again."

"I'll miss you..."

Normally the only words that came out of Sham's mouth were entirely rational. It was rare to hear her get so sentimental.

I'm gonna miss her too.

"Me too." I placed a hand on Sham's head and stroked her soft hair, gently combing it with my fingers. "You'll forget about feeling lonely when you visit the Grand Library."

"I won't."

I'm sure you will...

"I'll come visit whenever I can," I reassured her. "We'll both be in the royal capital. We're closer than any two stars."

Okay, that line felt a bit forced.

"But we'll be thousands of times further apart than if we lived in the same

house...”

Th-This girl...

The Grand Library was built next to the academy, which itself wasn't too far from the Ho residence, but “thousands” was probably a realistic estimate.

“How about I give you some homework the next time we meet? If you're busy working on that, it'll be like we're studying together. Then you won't feel lonely.”

That really felt like a stretch.

“Do you mean it?!”

But she beamed—she loved the idea.

“I do.”

Never thought I'd meet a student who's actually happy at the thought of getting homework. She's more than a teacher like me deserves.

Still, Sham was reluctant to see me go as I released her hand and signaled to the coachman that we should head off.

I rode alone in the carriage, though I suppose you could say my luggage accompanied me. As much as I'd been embarrassed to travel with my parents before, it felt empty without them.

We passed through the academy gate and entered the grounds where other students' carriages were gradually arriving.

After climbing down from the carriage with my luggage, I signaled to the coachman to head back.

I hadn't packed heavily, but there were still three adult-sized leather bags; it was a little much to carry all at once. I couldn't just drag them along the ground either, these weren't suitcases with wheels.

Soim might've helped me grow stronger, but not strong enough for this. I'd assumed a baggage handler would appear to help me out, but instead I was forced to locate someone myself. But that would still mean an exhausting trek with my heavy luggage until I found someone.

I considered finding a tree or something that I could hide everything under, but I worried they might be stolen. In the end, I remained rooted to the spot, thinking it over, when someone patted me on the shoulder.

“Hello. We meet again.”

I turned to see the boy who’d introduced himself as Myalo during the admission ceremony.

Am I glad to see him.

“Hey. Nice to see you again.” I put one of my pieces of luggage on the ground and shook Myalo’s hand.

Now I’d be able to ask him how the introduction to the dorm would go.

“I recognized you from behind and thought you might need some help,” Myalo said.

He was watching?

“Yeah... To be honest, I don’t even know where I’m supposed to go.”

My honest answer made Myalo chuckle. “I know the way. Let me take you there.”

Now this was a true honor student. He was like a ferryman appearing before someone stuck in front of a river, or a spider offering a thread to someone trapped in hell.

“Would you? Thanks.”

“The location was on the dormitory introduction pamphlet.”

Introduction pamphlet? No one mentioned that.

“Is there somewhere I can get one of those?”

“They were sent to our homes... Don’t you have one?”

Naturally, I did not. I could thank Rook once again.

“I have it somewhere, but to be honest, I never looked at it. Shameful, I know.”

This is genuinely embarrassing.

“I see. I don’t think the pamphlet matters much, but you really should have sent your luggage ahead.”

That was when I noticed that Myalo’s hands were empty—he had nothing with him. When I looked around, I saw other unfamiliar students who were also empty-handed. There wasn’t a single student with bulky pieces of luggage in sight...except for me.

Apparently, I was supposed to have sent my luggage ahead prior to moving in.

What’s wrong with my family? And they’re supposed to be a chieftain family?

“I could help you carry those if you’d like,” Myalo offered.

“No, I’m fine.”

I can’t make him do that.

“What will people think if I’m walking next to you empty-handed while you struggle?” Myalo replied with a frown.

Well, he does have a point. If his hands are free while I’m huffing and puffing with this massive pile of stuff, people might think that I’m his servant.

“It would really help me out actually. You wouldn’t mind?”

“Of course not.”

I passed him the lightest of my bags, which he took in one hand. After some brief consideration, he decided to carry it with two.

Is it really that heavy?

At this point, I noticed just how thin Myalo’s arms were. Soim had forced me to swing wooden rods around every day, and before that I’d been carrying hay bales around on the ranch, so I was fairly well-built. Myalo, on the other hand, wasn’t even from a warrior family. Life had to be radically different for boys raised by witches.

“Sorry. Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“Yes. It’s heavier than I thought, but I can handle it.”

Looks like he can carry it without too much trouble using two hands. It won’t be too tough for him. Actually, it’d be a little worrying if he couldn’t carry it at all

considering we're the same age and I can hold it in one hand along with an even heavier bag.

“Let’s get going, shall we? I don’t think the dormitory is much further.” Myalo led the way.

When we arrived, we found other children forming an orderly line in front of the dorm. Myalo and I waited in line with them.

The dorm appeared to be a large, two-story wooden building. One of its distinct features was a slanted roof that covered the whole building; its design ensured any snowfall would slide off to the rear. The second story included a roofed terrace. Half of the ground floor was devoted to the cafeteria, while the other half was a living area and lobby. I could also see some sofas.

Overall, it was quite an impressive dorm. Everything looked brand new. It was a far cry from the student hostel that I’d nervously stayed in for a short time during my student days in Japan. The memory made me feel nostalgic.

“I wonder where the older students are.”

“We won’t find them here,” Myalo told me. “This is the dorm for new students in our year group. It will be ours up until we graduate fifteen or so years from now. Once we’ve all graduated, there’ll be no more use for it. It’ll be torn down and a new one will be built.”

Seriously? So it really is a new building. No expenses spared, I guess. Actually, no. Not when I think about it...

This wooden building was about to be home to a bunch of boisterous kids for at least fifteen years. The whole thing would probably be trashed by the end. Most of us weren’t exactly sophisticated, but we still came from noble families. They couldn’t put new students in an old, decrepit dormitory.

Having no older students around was actually a relief. In a sports-orientated world, the older kids in the dorm were bound to get into the habit of throwing their weight around and bullying the younger ones. Tearing down the dorm and rebuilding it meant former students wouldn’t come back to visit for the sake of nostalgia. Expenses aside, it was all pros.

“Does the Cultural Academy do the same thing?”

“No. They have a huge dormitory—as big as the school itself—where everyone lives together. Although naturally, the boys and girls are in separate buildings.”

“Oh. I see.”

I can't see Sham coping with that. Well, it's not like she has to use the dorm at all. She can commute from the residence each day if she prefers.

The line made good progress while we talked. It led to a plump, middle-aged woman who sat at a long desk and rapidly took notes. Before long, I reached the front of the line.

“You can go first,” I told Myalo.

“No, after you, Yuri.”

After letting him carry my luggage and guide me here, I felt I should've at least let him go before me, but he had other plans. We were holding up the people behind, so arguing over the sequence now would just cause problems.

“I'll go first then,” I said to him, before giving the receptionist my name. “I'm Yuri Ho.”

“Yes, Yuri. You're in room number one.”

Number one? I guess because I'm the top student.

“Here. This is the key for securing your valuables.”

Apparently, I had a safe of some sort. We didn't get rooms to ourselves, so I was glad to learn of this feature as I took the key from her.

As I was leaving the line, I heard, “You're in room number two” from behind me.

I guess Myalo placed second after all. Wait, no—they obviously couldn't make the princess stay in a dorm full of boys. If they did, I'd start thinking that the people in the royal castle had lost their minds. There's a good chance I won't see Carol here. Nice.

“My room's next to yours,” Myalo noted, sounding pleased.

“Yeah. I said it already, but I hope we can be friends.”

“Likewise. I look forward to the next few years.”

We entered the dorm and went up to the second floor.

I found the room that had the number one written on its door—this was my room.

“I’ll return this to you,” Myalo said, offering me the bag he’d carried.

“Thanks. You really helped me out.”

“Not at all. See you around.”

I parted with Myalo and opened the door to my room.

The room was beautiful and still smelled of wood, as you’d expect from a new building. If I’d arrived at a place like this on vacation, I probably would’ve been filled with excitement.

But someone else had gotten here before me and was firmly planted on one of the beds—a boy with a crew cut.

Although the obvious assumption was that he was a student in my year, he was so muscular that it was hard to believe we were the same age. For some reason, he was glaring at me as if I made him mad.

Did I do something wrong? I couldn’t think of what I might’ve done, since I’d never seen him before now.

I looked around me. It was quite a big room.

At the back of the room I saw three beds. They were side by side, but still had some space between them. The foot of each bed faced toward me. The wall behind them also had a door that appeared to lead out onto the terrace.

Then I spotted two writing desks against the wall on the left, and one on the right. Three tall lockers filled the extra space next to the right desk—these must’ve been for storing valuables.

I decided to take the bed on the right side, so I walked toward it and dumped my luggage on the floor.

Now what do I say to him? It’s hard to greet someone who’s glaring at you. I already missed the best opportunity to say hello. I’ve been ignoring him the

whole time and it's getting awkward.

Crew Cut continued to stare right at my face as if I was the man who'd killed his father, although I couldn't recall ever killing anyone's parents. Unless I made the first move to offer friendship, there was little chance of us getting along. The whole situation made me want to sigh.

I'll say hello. Communication begins with a greeting, after all. He got here first, so I should be the one who breaks the ice.

"I'm Yuri Ho. Nice to meet you," I said smoothly.

"Don't care," he instantly—and rather rudely—replied.

What's his problem? Did he come from some war-torn country?

The conversation ended there. The atmosphere was starting to feel tense.

I'd been getting along so well with Myalo that I'd started to expect a good future here. I hadn't expected to be forced into making peace with an existing settler. But I was tired, so I ignored him and concentrated on unpacking.

There was already luggage in two separate piles at the edge of the room. Those must've been my roommates' belongings. Judging from the size of the piles, I'd actually traveled light with my three bags.

I walked over to the lockers, inserted the key into the one with my name on it, and opened it. It was like a closet inside. Half of it was designed to hold hanging clothes. I started stuffing my luggage in there.

They must've expected us to grow some more, because the top shelf was rather high up. I figured I'd give up on it because I wasn't tall enough to reach, but it turned out there was a stepping stool resembling a miniature ladder conveniently put here for us, so I used that.

I decided to put things I'd rarely use on the top shelf. I took a bundle of inkwells and large kingeagle feathers from my bag and stuffed it in there. I also put two of my completed journals in there. I'd considered leaving them at home, but I thought it best to bring them so that no one else could read them. I would've hated it if someone saw the weird text inside and concluded that I was some sort of demon worshipper. The key was attached to my belt, making

them difficult for others to read, but anyone with a knife could cut through the strap and open one.

I stored my empty bag underneath my bed. Then I placed a stationery set including an inkwell, feather quill, and scissors on the right-side desk. Finally, I also put my third, partially filled journal on there too.

Come to think of it, I can head over to the stationery store any time I want. That should be really convenient.

“Who said you could have that desk, jerk?”

I was surprised to hear the settler’s voice behind me. He was right that no one had said anything about it.

For some reason, I’d supposed this desk was mine. For starters, there were already things on one of the left-side desks, so I’d assumed it was first come, first served. The other thing was that my bed was also on the right side, so it would be a little difficult if my desk wasn’t next to me.

“Would it bother you if I use this one?” I asked him.

“Couldn’t care less.”

So you’re not bothered? Then what’s your problem?

“But ask me first,” he said.

Huh?

“Sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” I replied.

“You *what?*!” he cried.

Don’t yell at me...

“I just thought you might be a member of the royal family.”

That would explain why he thought he had special privileges in the dorm. This was a kingdom after all—unlike Ho Province, this region was under the royal family’s direct control.

But even so, that still wouldn’t add up. During the entrance ceremony, the academy teachers hadn’t even called Carol “Your Highness.” They’d just called her by her name. Presumably, they wanted to treat all of their students equally.

Not even royal family members got special treatment. In my opinion, it was impressive of the academy to do that.

“Think you’re better than me? Who gives a crap if you’re the top student. You’re not gonna be a good knight just ‘cause you read books.”

When did I act like I was better than him...?

He did, however, have a point. I’d had the same thought—it was odd that the Knight Academy ranked the students based on a written exam.

“You’re right. We shouldn’t decide who has which desk without a negotiation first.”

“What’s a ‘negotiation’?”

I almost burst out laughing. *Was that word a little too hard for him?*

“It means we’ll talk it out and come to an agreement. That way, the three of us can decide who gets which desk.”

That would certainly be fair. I didn’t know who the third roommate was, but they might be unhappy if we used a first-come-first-served policy and gave them whatever was left over.

“Don’t think so,” he said.

I was speechless.

You...don’t think so? He’s not giving a reason; he’s just arguing with me. I don’t know what his deal is. Does the settler want this desk for himself...? But in that case, why would he put his stuff on the other desk? Why?

There were too many questions. After what had happened this morning, life as a kid was starting to feel like too much.

“I’m Dolla,” he suddenly said.

Dolla? Oh, it’s him. Things made more sense now.

“Is your full name Dolla Godwin, by any chance?”

“That’s right.”

I just can’t catch a break, can I? Actually, it’s not all bad—I’m lucky I got to

meet Myalo. Looking on the bright side, you could say that these two encounters sort of balance each other out. Okay, maybe not. Getting this guy for a roommate definitely puts me at a loss. Fifteen years...

Even if I worked hard and graduated early, I'd still be stuck with Dolla for another five to seven years. All I could do was pray that I'd have a chance to change rooms at some point.

I knew he'd be dense, but not this dense. His parents have a lot to answer for. What did that jerk, Galla, do to raise a son like this? Was he just a bad father?

"Did you know that your father is one of my acquaintances?" I asked.

"Yeah, big deal. So what if you know my dad? Think it makes you special?"

No, that's not what I meant...

Galla must've said something to Dolla to make the boy so hostile right from the get-go. He was obviously a troublemaker to begin with, but I couldn't see why he'd act like this without having some sort of bias against me. If Galla had given his son weird ideas about me, that might explain things. Then again, I couldn't totally rule out the idea that Dolla was just like this with everyone.

"I don't consider myself special at all," I replied. "But I think I see what's happening here."

"Huuuh?!"

Don't scream at me...

"Shut up, nerd. You think you're all that? I'll show you," Dolla spat.

What's wrong with him?

Dolla walked over to me and swept the inkwell I'd left on the desk. It landed on the floor, where it shattered on impact and left a sizable black puddle.

Now he's done it, that was expensive. Is he gonna pay for that? The floor's dirty too. Who's going to clean it?

"Well? You scared?" he sneered, trying to intimidate me.

What's his problem? Galla's going to hear about this.

Next, Dolla grabbed my half-filled journal—a book I'd bought by saving up my

allowance—and held it high. He waved it around to get my attention.

Ah...

“Brought your books to study, huh? You think you’re so smart.”

“Give that back.”

That book’s worth more to me than you can imagine, you little shit. Even I’m not willing to take this.

“That’s precious to me. Give it back,” I demanded.

I couldn’t just laugh it off if he got it dirty or damaged in any way.

“Huh? You’re telling me what to do?”

Dolla threw the journal down on the ground, stepped on it, and ground it with his shoe’s heel.

Oh, I see how it is. He’s looking for a fight. Good—that’s the quickest way to settle this.

“Hah... Are you a dog, by any chance?” I asked him.

“Huh...?”

“Oh, that’s right, dogs can’t understand speech. Well, I’m happy to treat you like a dog if that’s what you’d like.”

It was generally wise to ignore this kind of idiot, but I couldn’t just ignore a roommate. I had no choice but to approach him like an untrained pet. It looked as though Soim’s lessons were going to come in use much sooner than I’d expected.

“I’d be more than happy to, in fact,” I continued. “If I’m living with a dog, I’d better train it properly.”

“What’d you say...?” Dolla growled, glaring at me.

“You’re all bark and no bite, aren’t you? Weakling,” I taunted him.

“Asshole!”

Dolla threw the first punch, aiming a hook at me with all his might. It was just what I’d expected from someone as aggressive as him. Dodging would be

pitifully easy. After training with Soim, this felt like going back to a game's tutorial fight after beating the last boss.

Dolla would have to do more than simply make a fist and throw it—the power behind a punch depended on how the fighter put their body weight behind it, and its speed could vary drastically depending on how they carried themselves.

As I dodged Dolla's punch, I gripped his sleeve and lifted his arm upward. At the same time, I used my other hand to grab his collar. With my back curled and my knees bent, I used both my arms to pull him—first by his sleeve, then by hoisting him onto my shoulders using his collar. From there, I sprang up and straightened my body, launching Dolla off my back. Rather than throwing him to the ground, I released my grip partway so that he'd fly away from me. Dolla was flipped upside down before slamming into the door with an incredible thud.

I'd just used a shoulder throw. And although a child's weight wasn't enough to smash through the door, the upper hinge popped loose.

I ran toward him and plowed my foot into his solar plexus with all my might, as if I was kicking a ball.

"Guuuh..." Dolla sputtered. He made inhuman sounds as he writhed on the ground gripping his abdomen.

I grabbed him by the shoulder, forced him onto his back, and got on top of him. One of his arms lay beyond my reach, but the other was pinned immobile under my leg.

"Hey," I said.

"Jerk!" Dolla tried to hit me, but I grabbed his arm to stop him.

"You're sure you want to pick a fight with me?" I asked.

"Huuuh?!"

I curled my fingers into a fist and swung downward to punch Dolla in the nose as hard as I could. The impact made a dull sound. I could feel his soft, childlike flesh against my hand.

Dolla must have been unaccustomed to getting hit—he looked back at me like

a confused little boy. Blood flowed steadily from his nose.

“You heard me. Are you picking a fight with me?”

Dolla finally seemed to snap out of his shock and glared at me intensely. He tried to hit me with his one free arm, but he wasn’t able to put his shoulder into the swing—I’d pinned his other arm down, after all. As a result, he basically just flailed his arm about, unable to reach my face.

I was a little surprised at how hotheaded I’d gotten, but he’d crossed a line that never should’ve been crossed. He’d taken the journal filled with everything I’d painstakingly written about my memories from Japan, slammed it against the ground, and crushed it under his dirty shoe. What’s worse, the idiot had done it without a second thought. He didn’t seem to realize that certain actions would always carry consequences. He had no qualms about trying to trample my dignity under his foot.

“Answer me,” I spat.

I hit him hard once again. There was another dull sound of an impact, and blood sprayed from his nose.

I watched as Dolla’s expression changed. His instincts must’ve told him that he couldn’t recover now that I had him at an overwhelming disadvantage. Although he showed no hint of fear, he was clearly having second thoughts.

“You’re picking a fight with me?” I asked again.

“Y-Yeah.”

“Then you must be ready for the consequences.”

I brought my fist down on his face. He made a strange, muffled noise as something warm and wet covered my hand. The area around Dolla’s nose was bright red with his blood.

“I told you to give it back because it’s important to me, didn’t I?”

I hit him a few more times. By this point, it made little difference to me whether I hit him once or ten times. Dolla’s lip was split, his nose was in a sorry state, and his face was coated in blood. It didn’t matter anymore. I couldn’t feel anything for this piece of trash.

“You’re sure? Answer me,” I goaded him.

“It h-hurts.”

“Here’s what you get for stomping on it.” I hit him twice more.

If I keep this up, he might lose his front teeth. I’d better finish this.

I put both hands around Dolla’s neck.

“I could kill you if I wanted. Did you think you were the only one who could take things away?”

“Agh... Gah...”

Dolla gripped my arm with his free hand. He must’ve been using all of his strength, but it wasn’t much.

“They say death’s the only cure for idiocy. Is that what you need?”

“Ghhuh, gahh.”

“Die. Serves you right for underestimating me.”

“Agah...”

I switched my hold so that, rather than completely crushing his airway, I’d just knock him out instead. In no time at all, Dolla’s eyes rolled back in their sockets and he went limp. He was down.

I put my hand to his nose and mouth to check he was still breathing.

That’s good. Well, not that there’s anything good about all this. I came to my senses. *What am I doing?*

A moment later, the door sprang open, and the middle-aged woman who’d greeted us at reception entered the room.

“What are you doing?!”

A large crowd of students milled about behind her and peeked in through the door. I looked behind me and saw another large group looking in through the terrace window. I’d gone and caused a scene.

“We had a fight. It just ended,” I explained while getting up and shaking some blood off of my wet hand.

That's not going to cut it, is it?

Dolla had passed out, but with his blood-covered face and anguished, reddened expression, he looked dead. I, on the other hand, was unscathed.

Well, now I'm expelled, but maybe that's for the best. There's no way I could've coexisted peacefully with this rabid dog for several years. Satsuki might have a fit when I tell her, but I'll deal with that when I come to it.

"You've gone too far!"

Yeah, I figured I overdid it.

The woman grabbed Dolla's shoulders and shook him violently. "Boy! Wake up!"

"I think it'd be better if you didn't shake him. He's just unconscious."

The woman checked that he was still breathing and then laid him on the floor.

Another adult woman appeared. "What in the world happened?!"

"Could you go to the medical room and summon a doctor here?" the first woman said to the second.

"Ah... Y-Yes, right away!" she said before leaving.

This is turning into a major incident. I've really gone and done it.

"Yuri Ho. Explain what happened here," the first woman—who I assumed was the dorm's housemistress—demanded.

It was a tough question to answer.

"He insulted me and damaged my property. Then he got violent and picked a fight with me, so I fought back."

"Be more specific—what happened exactly?"

Specific? How much more specific can I be? It's not like you'll believe any excuses from a kid like me anyway.

"Those are the specifics. That's all that happened."

"You're not sorry at all, are you?" She looked furious with me.

Huh? This is ticking me off. What's this school's problem? It's been nothing but

problems ever since yesterday. I've had enough.

"I'm not the one who needs to apologize."

"What did you say?" The housemistress looked at me angrily.

"You don't seem to understand a thing, so let me back up a little. I entered the room you assigned to me, only to find this rabid dog of a thug in here. He starts hurling insults and trying to pick a fight right from the get-go. He takes one of my possessions, refuses to give it back, damages it, and then throws a punch at me while we're arguing. And once I'm done defending myself, you show up, blame me for everything, and tell me to apologize for my actions. How is any of that fair? What did I do wrong? It's a good thing I happened to know self-defense, because otherwise I could've been badly injured through no fault of my own. And you want me to be sorry? If anyone can complain here, it's *me.*"

When my rant was over, the woman held her head in her hand like I'd given her a headache.

I guess the supposed child prodigy is now the dorm's biggest troublemaker. My reputation just took a nosedive.

"Whatever the situation, you may face punishment for this. Your family has a residence here in the capital, correct? Return there and we'll contact you in due course."

I'm getting sent home? I really am being treated like a troublemaker. I don't know what to say.

I left my three journals in the locker and closed it. I took my purse, dagger, and locker key with me before leaving the room.



That had been the first fight of my life. I wasn't used to such things, which might've been why I'd overdone it. Now that I was able to think straight, I realized that my attempts at self-defense would actually count as excessive force.

Haah... I've gone and done it. Mom and dad are gonna be furious when I get

home.

As I gloomily left the dorm, Myalo called out to me.

“Yuri, wait up.”

I stopped. “What is it?”

What could he want?

“I know you’re still worked up over what happened, but you should at least clean your hands and face before leaving. There’s blood on them.”

“Oh, okay.”

I was about to carelessly wipe my face with my sleeve, but Myalo grabbed my arm to stop me.

“You’ll stain your clothes.”

Good point. But there’s blood on both of my hands, so my sleeves are all I’ve got.

“There’s a well by the rear entrance. Let’s wash you up there.”

Myalo grabbed my hand and led me there. Now I was getting blood on his hand too.

“Sorry. For everything,” I apologized.

“Don’t be. It’s not worth dwelling on it now.”

It isn’t?

“Didn’t you see what happened?”

“I saw. It was impressive.” Myalo sounded a little merry. Excited, even.

“No it wasn’t. It was stupid.”

I really shouldn’t have gone that far. I receive a little training and that’s how I act when I get mad? There’s a side of me I never knew existed.

We reached the well where Myalo used his bloodstained hand to pull up the brand-new bucket, which was full of fresh water.

“Please give me your hands.”

I held out my hands and Myalo tipped the bucket so that the water washed over them. It rinsed the blood from my hands. Once they were clean, I washed Myalo's hands in turn, then turned my attention to my face and bloodstained sleeves. I started to feel better once I was done. That was when I realized that I'd reeked of blood the whole time.

"Haah..." I couldn't help but sigh.

I've really done it this time. I'll be expelled. How can I make this up to my parents?

"Looks like we'll be saying goodbye even though we just met," I said.

"What do you mean?" Myalo replied.

"They'll probably expel me for this, won't they?"

"Pfft," Myalo laughed. "You thought you'd get expelled? There's no chance of that."

"There isn't?"

He has to be wrong.

"It'd be another story if you punched Princess Carol, but the idea of a member of the Ho family being expelled over something like this is a little far-fetched."

He sounds pretty certain...

"But I gave him a real beating."

"But you didn't kill him, did you?"

"I didn't go that far."

"The academy won't want to make a big deal of it either. They'll make sure he's not bleeding and that his face is cleaned up before he goes home to his parents. They might even hide his injuries with makeup. So there's no need to worry about any of that."

What he said made sense. It wasn't like the blood had come from wounds—well, besides maybe a few cuts around his eyelids and a split lip. It had all been from his nose, so he'd just be left with some bruising once he was cleaned up. His bones weren't broken or anything.

Getting some assurance from someone else had made me regain my calm. It was just as Myalo said. I hadn't realized it until now, but I hadn't been thinking straight.

"And Dolla is well-known for causing trouble. Whatever happens, I'm sure you won't be expelled. I guarantee it."

Hearing that made me feel I was going to be okay.

"All right. I feel like I can relax now."

It felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I wouldn't have been able to look Rook or Suzuya in the eye if I'd been expelled on my first day.

"I'm glad that I could be of service," Myalo said, sounding pleased.

After parting with Myalo, I returned to the Ho residence on foot. The gatekeeper was there to greet me when I arrived.

"Hello, I'm back," I said to him.

He welcomed me home and let me through. My face was known to the staff here, though the fact that I hadn't returned via carriage made him suspicious.

When I entered the building, the head maid appeared and immediately spotted the blood splatters on my clothes.

"Are you quite all right, little one?"

I'd known this maid for many years and could never get her to stop calling me little one.

"I'm fine. I just had a fight with my roommate. The blood's all his. Will it wash out?"

"Please remove those clothes right away. I'll bring you something else to wear. Oh, but you can't undress here—to the parlor, please."

You don't have to tell me not to strip naked in the entrance hall.

She sprinted off before I could reply to her, so I went into the parlor alone and began removing my uniform. The head maid returned with clean clothes before I'd finished undressing.

"My apologies, but I must ask you to dress yourself. The blood will leave a

stain if I wait too long.”

Now I see why she’s in a rush.

As soon as I handed her the soiled clothes I’d removed, she hastily ran off with them. My clothes had almost completely dried out, but hopefully wetting the fabric earlier with water from the well had prevented staining.

After I’d changed, I sat down on a sofa in the parlor and relaxed.

After a short time, Rook came to talk to me. I knew he was around because he’d planned to stay here today and tomorrow. It felt awkward to see him regardless.

“Yuri, what happened?”

I quickly stood up from the sofa and bowed my head.

“I got into a fight already, and I was asked to leave the dormitory. I’m sorry,” I told him honestly.

This is shameful.

“A fight? With who?” Rook looked cross as he asked me.

I guess he’s a little mad at me. Then again, who wouldn’t be?

“With Galla’s son. I’m not sure whether it’s just a coincidence, but he’s my roommate in the dormitory.”

“Ah,” Rook replied. He sounded understanding. “You shouldn’t pick fights with people. That’s not what martial arts are for.”

It was a common warning given to martial arts students, but Rook said it without much conviction—he’d probably heard enough about Dolla from Galla to know that the boy was a troublemaker.

“I won’t do it again.”

“Don’t get into fights.”

“Yes, dad.”

“He attacked you, did he?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so. I’ve heard a few stories from Galla.”

I knew it.

“I see.”

Good thing I’ve got such an understanding dad. I don’t think I would’ve been able to stand it if he’d been disappointed in me and given me a long lecture.

“You didn’t use a dagger, did you?”

“Just my hands.”

“You didn’t break any bones or fracture his jaw?”

“Nothing like that.”

“Okay... And just to be sure, you didn’t kill him? And you didn’t beat him unconscious?”

I had to stop myself from laughing. *That’s asking the questions in the wrong order.*

“I didn’t kill him, but I did choke him out.”

“You choked him?” Rook’s tone changed—he sounded more reproachful.

I have to take blame for that.

“Why’d you do that? Using a move like that without a lot of training is dangerous.”

“He was like a rabid dog. I thought he’d keep fighting to the point of exhaustion unless I choked him out.”

That much was true.

“Use an armlock at times like that,” Rook chastised me.

“I thought I might injure his elbow.”

I’d learned a lot about holds from Soim. The pain someone in an armlock felt was completely different from the pain of being punched. I’d experienced it myself, so I was all too familiar with it. When done properly, it caused pain beyond what most people could withstand, so it was an easy way to make an opponent submit.

But if the subject of an armlock panicked and thrashed in an attempt to get free, there was a risk of a tendon injury. Those could be devastating. In some cases, the tendon would hurt whenever the joint moved, even ten or twenty years later. And it wasn't the sort of pain that could just be brushed aside—if, for example, brandishing a spear caused pain, the muscle would be stimulated in response. That would make the spear-bearer's movements awkward, and it could be a lifelong impediment to a knight.

"Hmm. You could've kicked his legs while avoiding his punches."

The legs... Should I have gone for the legs?

"He's bigger than I am. Would it have been possible for someone like me?"

I hadn't considered the legs.

For someone with a small body, it was always difficult to deal damage when landing any kind of blow, so I hadn't considered any fighting styles of that sort. Even Soim had told me not to rely on blows until I'd grown up.

"If you'd kicked him repeatedly, that might've worked, but I'm not sure. Maintaining your distance takes a lot of skill when you're against someone who's used to fighting. Take Galla, for example—a single blow from someone his size would be enough to permanently knock down anyone who's not properly trained."

He was right. A low kick that left Dolla unable to stand would've been ideal. But it was just as he'd said: when an opponent was trying to punch and grab you, it took skill to repeatedly deliver low blows while keeping a fixed, safe distance. Sure, it might've been possible in the middle of a tidy courtyard where there were plenty of places to retreat, but it was highly unlikely in a small dorm room. One mistake and I would've been pinned against a wall and beaten senseless. It was beyond my skill level.

"It sounds like the best option was to avoid fighting in the first place," I said. "I should've yielded to him and then complained to the housemistress. If that didn't work, I could've commuted from here."

"Maybe...but that's not how a knight does things. You'd be laughed at." Rook looked surprisingly bitter.

Apparently, that wasn't an acceptable way for a man to handle their problems. Running off with my tail between my legs whenever someone picked a fight would just cause more problems.

Don't get into fights, but don't back down if someone picks a fight. Also, don't injure anyone when fighting. Those demands weren't reasonable. From the moment Dolla had picked a fight with me, I'd been caught between a rock and a hard place. But the problems people faced when dealing with one another often weren't easy. As sad as it was, it was just one of those things about life.

"I'm actually planning to go drinking with Galla today. I'll talk to him about it."

D-Dad... You're planning to go out drinking while your son's dealing with this impossible dilemma? Oh well, I suppose I'll be all right.

"Ah! What happened?!" someone cried out, interrupting us.

Suzuya had appeared from behind Rook and spotted me. She was shocked to see her son here when I should've been at the academy. I felt a chill run down my spine. In a sense, she was the last person I wanted to be scolded by.

"I'm s-sorry. I came home." My voice sounded pathetic, even to me.

Rook was there to back me up, of course. "Yuri had a little fight with a friend. It happens all the time."

Thanks, dad.

"You stay out of this," Suzuya snapped.

Dad closed his mouth.

Dad...

"You had a fight, Yuri?" she asked. She didn't sound sympathetic. If anything, it sounded like she was grilling me.

"Yes..."

This is nothing new, but every time it happens, I feel like I'm really a little kid. It seriously gets me down.

"You punched someone?"

"I did."

No sooner than I'd finished speaking, I felt a hard, sharp smack on the top of my head. Somehow, it reverberated all the way down to my jaw. Stars swam in my vision, and I couldn't help but curl up and hold my head in my hands.

Ouch! Hey, that really hurt!

My eyes welled up with tears.

"If you punched or kicked each other in a fight, then you both deserve to get hit like that."

Since when was that the rule?

I'd teared up so much it looked like I was viewing things from underwater.

"I'm sure the other boy will get hit by his parents too, so it's fair," Suzuya explained. She sounded fully confident in her unique form of reasoning.

I somehow doubt that, I thought, but I didn't want to argue. *I can't win against my mom.*

A little later, Rook went out drinking and Sham returned home. It turned out we'd just missed each other when I'd first arrived, since she'd headed out to the Grand Library. When she learned I was back, she was overjoyed and came straight to see me.

I ate dinner with Suzuya and Sham while a bump steadily grew on my head.

Afterward, Sham asked me for the homework I'd promised her, so I stayed up late into the night coming up with problems. While I was busy, Rook came home drunk and told me, "Galla says thanks for teaching his son a lesson. You can go back to the academy tomorrow with no worries."

I was relieved, and this relief turned to sleepiness, so it was tough to stay awake long enough to finish making homework questions. When I finally went to sleep, all I could imagine was how pleased Sham would be.



The next day, I woke up early and boarded a carriage in my sleep-deprived state. When I reached the dorm, I saw a puffy-faced Dolla waiting for me at the entrance.

What does he want now? I wish he'd leave me alone...

Dolla's entire face was swollen and covered in bruises. He looked so bad that I wondered if he might've been missing a couple of teeth. I was impressed that he was here at all.

As I approached the entrance, he spoke to me. "I didn't lose."

I was dumbfounded. *Is there something wrong with my ears?*

"I'd like to ask you a question," I said.

"What...?"

"If that didn't count as a loss, then what would it take?" I genuinely wanted to know.

"I don't accept that I've lost."

Seriously? So you don't lose unless you've accepted your defeat? That's a simple way of looking at it. Well, I suppose it's sort of like his faith—there's no use arguing with it. If he tells me he's fine, then he's fine, even if his face is black and blue. That's all well and good for him, but it puts me in a tough spot.

"Then who won yesterday's fight?" I asked.

At first, Dolla didn't respond. He clearly didn't know what to say, because he didn't utter a single word. He couldn't declare himself the winner, but he didn't want to concede a draw either. Finally, he appeared to reach a conclusion.

"Our fight's not over," he declared.

Oh, I'm tired of this.

"All right. Let's say I lost yesterday's fight. There you go. I lose," I conceded.

"Huuuh?!" Dolla looked at me in disbelief.

"Isn't that nice? You won. Congratulations."

"No. I don't accept that."

"But you just said yourself that someone wins when the other person accepts that they've lost."

That's why I said what I did. What's the problem?

“No.”

What’s wrong with him?

“Then let me ask you—if you don’t accept that you’ve lost, even after being bloodied and choked out, what would it actually take?”

“I’ll accept it if I lose two or three times.”

Aaand he’s back to talking nonsense.

“Oh. Really? So even after being beaten to a pulp, you’ll act like you were unbeaten if you defeat me in another fight right now? Is that the sort of man you are? Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

“Grrr...” Unsurprisingly, he didn’t have a comeback. “Fine. I lost yesterday. But we’re gonna fight again. Just you wait.”

No way. Why’s he causing so much trouble? What’s with him?

“I’d rather not.”

“Jerk... You won’t give me a rematch?” His eyes were full of resentment for some reason.

“So in your world, you can repeat every fight as many times as you like? That’s a real simple outlook you’ve got.”

“Huh?”

“A true fight between two knights is a fight to the death. Losing doesn’t just mean you didn’t win—it means you’re dead and it’s over.”

Soim had repeated that to me many times over. Having lived through several battles, he often spoke of the mindset they required.

“I went easy on you yesterday because it was just an argument, but if it was a duel, we’d have fought to the death. If you intend to be a knight, I’d advise you to take such matters more seriously. Unless, of course, you plan on spending your whole life on petty squabbles like the one we had yesterday.”

Unfortunately, someone like him was likely to do just that, brainless as he was.

“Grrr...”

“If you *do* want to fight me, at least get some proper training first.”

“You mean I should take you on again once I’ve trained? All right. But you’re gonna give me a rematch. I’m not gonna let you run.”

“I’m not running. Just promise me you won’t attack me while I’m sleeping; that wouldn’t be a real victory.” I decided to impose that as a rule while I had the upper hand.

“As if I would! You don’t know who you’re talking to!”

Feels like this whole thing started because you had no idea who you were talking to... But whatever. At least now I know that I don’t need to sleep with a weapon under my pillow.

IV

After my encounter with the meathead, I returned to the dorm. The housemistress gave me a cold stare as I passed through the lobby, but that was the extent of my problems. The adults must’ve smoothed everything over; Galla probably hadn’t made a fuss over it.

When I got back to the room, I found the hinge had been repaired, and the ink stain had been cleaned up. They hadn’t gone so far as to put a new inkwell on my desk to compensate for the broken one, but apart from that, everything had been set right again.

I was done caring about the meathead, but I wondered if I owed our third roommate an apology. When I imagined just how shocked he must’ve been yesterday when he saw the state we’d left the room in, I felt a twinge of pity.

However, when I looked around the room, I realized that he probably hadn’t seen it at all. His luggage wasn’t here yet, which meant he hadn’t arrived yesterday. Unless, of course, he’d temporarily been moved to another room because we’d messed this one up so bad that it hadn’t been fit to sleep in.

In any case, I was hungry. I decided I’d better grab some breakfast. I’d left the residence before dawn, so I hadn’t eaten anything at all.

Gong, gong, gong. I heard a bell chime three times while I was still working

out my breakfast plans.

The dorm soon became noisy with the sounds of students emerging into the corridor. It must've been a wake-up call, which meant that it was time to eat. I headed out with everyone else.

The beautiful smell of baked bread filled the air as I descended the stairs and headed for the dining hall.

After I'd eaten from the buffet-style breakfast, a sort of homeroom started.

"Please look at this." The housemistress pointed to a canvas—a large, thick sheet similar to a sailcloth—that hung on the wall with a wooden rod. Rather than a painting, though, there was a list on it. "Before you can graduate from the Knight Academy, you must gain three hundred credits from the options listed here."

Oh, it's a lesson plan. Three hundred sure sounds like a lot. I hope we can at least get ten credits for each course.

The housemistress's talk could be summarized as follows:

Half of the three hundred credits—one hundred and fifty of them—came from courses unique to the Knight Academy. Of those, one hundred were practical classes and the remaining fifty were lecture-based. That meant a third of the credits gained at the Knight Academy came from lessons involving physical activity.

The lecture courses included compulsory and optional classes. Students received a very different curriculum depending on what they chose. Infantry, cavalry, and artillery officers needed very different training, but those weren't the roles we were studying for. The categories here were quite different.

Some of my fellow knights-to-be aimed to ride kingeagles and become sky knights. Of course, a knighthood alone didn't make someone a sky knight—a very different curriculum was required. In fact, there were a lot of special skills that were demanded of a sky knight. Fortunately, training in all of those skills would count toward their graduation credits.

But students hoping to become sky knights had a high chance of being rejected. The housemistress explained that those with no prior experience

riding kineagles would need intense training, and they'd be forced to quit the course unless they showed real potential. Presumably, anyone who was too scared to look down while in the air would be kicked off the course instantly.

The remaining credits—the last hundred and fifty—were entirely lectures on general topics which were also common to the Cultural Academy. One hundred and twenty of those credits came from compulsory classes, while we were free to choose how to obtain the remaining thirty.

The former seemed to cover basic education, such as the Shanish language, math, social studies, and history. Even a knight would shame themselves if they didn't understand a bare minimum amount of culture. There were many choices for our options. Some subjects sounded similar to chemistry, but I imagined they'd simply teach us nonsense.

There was an elementary course on Ancient Shanish too, but I'd had enough experience with that language for one lifetime. Actually, make that several lifetimes. I planned to avoid it even if I lived through seven different lives. In fact, I'd hated reading ancient writings in my past life too.

One of the courses in particular caught my interest: The Kulatish Language. I was surprised that they even had a way of teaching it to us. It was knowledge that could become invaluable at some point in life. Learning the Kulati's language—the other race of people who inhabited this world alongside the Shanti—could be a major advantage. If this kingdom were to collapse, I could live in hiding in a region ruled over by Kulati, or escape persecution by relocating to a land where my people were safe. In either case, knowing their language would be crucial.

As much as the Kulati were said to hate the Shanti, Eurasia was a big place, and hatred for Shanti didn't necessarily exist in every region. There could be safe places out there, like remote islands that remained undiscovered.

"Does everyone understand?" the housemistress asked.

It wasn't clear exactly how much she'd expected us to understand, but my guess was that half the people here were clueless.

"If it's too hard for any of you, come and see me later. We'll make a lesson plan together."

I bet she'll be making those lesson plans all day.

“Now I’ll inform you of today’s arrangements. You’ll be tested to see whether you can be exempted from some of your compulsory classes. I’m sure some of you have already studied enough Shanish and math to skip the basics, so those students will be awarded the necessary credits.”

Really? I don’t just get to skip those classes, I get the credits for free? Such compassion. Is there a god or a Buddha helping to manage the academy?

“However, applying for exemptions is optional. Make the application yourself, and the course teacher will test you. Those who didn’t score well enough on the exam the other day won’t be allowed to apply. Those who choose not to apply for exemptions, and those who aren’t eligible for any exemptions, please focus on selecting your courses instead.”

I see. They’re making use of our exam results again.

It made sense to set an eligibility threshold as it saved a lot of teachers’ time. Otherwise, they would’ve had to talk to every student.

Excelling at that entrance exam had caused a ton of problems for me so far, but now I was glad I’d done it. My three years of hard work hadn’t been for nothing. Well, except for the ancient Shanish lessons—those were still worthless.

The talk of exemptions and getting free credits was music to my ears. Probably because of past trauma I harbored from my days as a credit-chasing college student.



“Wow...” the old math teacher said. “It’s hard to believe, but your math knowledge might actually surpass mine.”

“Really?”

Hooray! I had to stop myself from cheering. If he let me skip math and abacus classes, I’d earn a whole thirty credits for free.

“I think you could benefit from some of the specialized courses at the Cultural Academy, but you’ve nothing left to learn from the Knight Academy’s

compulsory math courses.”

“Thank you.”

All right. Sounds like I can skip them.

“But your skills with the abacus could use some polish.”

“Oh?”

I’m not good enough with an abacus?

“I’ll be generous and let you skip the intermediate abacus class, but I want you to take the advanced one.”

Despite being called abacus class, it wasn’t just about moving beads around; it also included some of the clerical calculations needed for things like account books. I’d already learned just about everything I needed to know in this area, but apparently not thoroughly enough. It sounded like I’d only narrowly avoided taking the intermediate classes.

By the way, their abacuses weren’t the type used in Japan. They had a similar design, but rather than each row having five disc-like beads with a reckoning bar separating them, each row included nine round beads.

Still, I could consider myself lucky to have skipped half the course. And I’d been made exempt from all five modules of the math course, which was great. All in all, I was able to skip twenty-seven credits’ worth of courses in this subject.

When it came to the other mandatory courses, I was exempt from the entirety of Shanish and all but the final modules of history and social sciences. In total, I was allowed to skip one hundred and four credits out of the one hundred and twenty that made up compulsory education. And for the special Knight Academy courses, I was also exempt from sixteen out of fifty credits.

It all came to a total of one hundred twenty credits skipped. So overall, out of three hundred credits, I’d been given forty percent of them for free. Wonderful.

After being interviewed until late at night, I returned to the dorm. The housemistress was there, looking rather frazzled after dealing with kids all day.

I felt hungry, so I headed to the dinner hall and found Myalo eating some late

dinner. All of the exceptional students had undergone a lot of interviews, so he'd probably been busy until recently like I had. I took a well-stocked tray and went over to him.

"Mind if I sit here?" I asked.

"Please go ahead," he replied.

We talked as we ate.

"This system's great. I bet you got out of a lot of classes too."

"Yes, I was exempt from ninety-three credits," he replied.

Ninety-three credits. Amazing.

The curriculum had been designed to help kids who couldn't write or do basic math catch up with everyone else. We were about the age of a fifth grader, so children who'd studied—either under a governess at home or at a cram school—were bound to be able to skip the first five grades' worth of courses. I'd expected the smart students with a good education to skip between thirty and forty credits, but ninety-three credits was incredible.

"I knew you were a smart one, Myalo."

I shouldn't be so surprised.

"I'm nothing special. How did you do, Yuri?"

"One hundred twenty credits."

Myalo's spoon fell from his hand and landed on his wooden tray with a clatter.

Is one hundred and twenty really that much? Well, it's not like I can lie.

"I should probably mention that I've been studying a lot," I explained. I'd learned from Carol that being overly humble was not a good idea.

I'll just tell him that it's because I work hard. It's true that the only reason I can skip so many credits is because of everything Satsuki put me through.

"I-I see. Well, it's still impressive. You must have set a new record."

"I'm not sure about that."

I'd rather not go around breaking records. I'd feel bad about it since I'm cheating.

"I don't care about records, but I'll be glad if I can graduate easily," I said. "Hopefully I'll be finished here before too long."

"Yes. Though I've heard that it's not possible to graduate from the Knight Academy *too* early."

Huh?

"What do you mean?"

"Because we have practical classes."

Ah, those.

Some of the courses needed to be taken in sequence without skipping anything, kind of like how someone couldn't learn multiplication without learning addition first. It was going to take me years to clear every practical course from beginner to advanced.

"Oh, you're right. I wonder how many years it'll take to get through practical classes if everything goes smoothly."

"Seven years, in theory," Myalo replied without pausing to think.

He really does know everything.

"Then I'll graduate at seventeen if all goes well."

Rook had told me that people normally graduated around twenty-two or twenty-three, so seventeen felt a little optimistic. For example, suppose there was an advanced jujitsu class that required skill on the level of a third-year high schooler. If someone younger were to be permitted to take the course, they'd have a hard time keeping up. They might try to make up for their lack of experience using talent and hard work, but they'd always be smaller than the other students on the course.

Problems of that sort could increase the minimum of seven years to something more like fifteen years.

"I've heard that no matter how talented or strong someone is, they won't be

allowed to pass the final practical classes until they reach twenty.”

Oh. That’s way later than I expected.

“Why? Don’t they want us to graduate quickly?” I asked.

“In some cases, graduates are sent off to war as soon as they have their knighthood. So the academy won’t award one to someone who isn’t fully grown, no matter how talented they are.”

“Ah, so it’s like that.”

It would be awful if someone with enough talent to graduate at the age of seventeen could be sent off to die on the battlefield before they’d even grown up. The academy’s compromise was to set a minimum graduation age of twenty. It was bad news for me, because it meant I’d be stuck here longer, but I could see why it was a good policy from a political standpoint.

“Sounds like there’s no point in hurrying,” I said.

“Yes, I think you’re right,” Myalo agreed.

Even graduating at twenty was going to demand a lot of hard work. That said, the number of free credits I’d earned would make everything a lot easier for me.

“Is it the same at the Cultural Academy?”

“Cultural Academy students can graduate at any age. In fact, graduating early is a mark of distinction, so many people hurry to do so. Exemption from courses is much more important there than here.”

That’s interesting.

“You sure know a lot, Myalo.”

“I really don’t. All I know is this sort of boring trivia.”

I wouldn’t call it boring trivia...

“Where did you learn it all?”

“Where...? Well, you could say that remembering all these trivial things is what people from witch families do for a living.”

Really? Well, I suppose that's what bureaucracy is all about.

"I'll bet witch families like yours have a ton of history behind them."

"That's true. My family is one of the seven witches, after all. I can trace our history back to the days of the empire."

All the way back to the empire? That's impressive.

It was possible to trace the Ho family's roots that far back too, but we were just an average family of farmers in the southern region of Scandinavia in those days.

Back then, my ancestors—whose names had been lost to time—had prospered enough on their farm to become influential within their village. My ancestors grew wealthy, and when war caused the collapse of the empire, the family head's ambition drove him to use that confusion to his advantage. He fought until our family was the most powerful one in all of the southern territory. Then, when the Shiyalta Kingdom was established, my family scrambled to win the favor of Shiyalta Flue Shaltl—or perhaps she came to them—and they were made the chieftain family of the south.

We were basically just upstart farmers, but that had all happened almost nine hundred years ago. Over the course of a few centuries, any family could go from being upstarts to prestigious. Our family tree only started being recorded around the point that the family gained authority over the region, so we didn't quite have the honor of being able to trace our history back to the days of the empire.

"The seven witches? I can't even imagine what they do."

I'll bet it's some important work in the royal castle.

"I assure you it's nothing pleasant," Myalo told me.

"I don't believe that. I know that they handle all the bureaucratic work."

Unlike fighting or carpentry, bureaucracy was difficult to appreciate because it wasn't the sort of work you could see in action. Nonetheless, it was indispensable to any developed nation. A small village could be ruled by a single person because one elder could single-handedly keep track of all the goings-on,

but a single monarch couldn't hope to watch every corner of a kingdom made up of millions of people. There would always be a need for others who became the eyes and ears—not to mention the arms and legs—of the nation's ruler.

"That's certainly the right answer if the question comes up in an exam, but in reality, they corrupt offices and line their own pockets."

"They do? I don't get what you mean."

Though I'm not surprised corruption exists. Maybe it's even a given for a country in this era.

"Let me give an example: if they're in charge of a harbor, they'll employ a longshoreman to steal cargo from the ships. When it's the managers orchestrating the theft, there's no way to prevent it. That means anyone who doesn't want their cargo stolen has to pay a bribe. It's the easiest job in the world, the family can simply sit back and let the money flow in."

"That makes sense..."

A longshoreman was a worker who loaded and unloaded cargo from merchant ships. There were no standardized shipping containers or cranes, so all cargo had to be moved by hand. The royal capital heavily relied upon ships for the transport of goods, which made a longshoreman's job one of the most crucial types of manual labor in the royal capital. The idea of making it routine to corrupt that sort of worker sounded dangerous to someone like me.

A little deception and bribery didn't mean the entire country was doomed—such things could never be completely stamped out among bureaucrats, after all—but at the very least, there needed to be periodic purges. Cleaning up corruption would bring down families who relied on it. Given that these seven witches boasted proud histories that stretched back to the days of the empire, it must've meant they'd never experienced that kind of cleansing. Various offices must've been allowed to rot under their amoral influence the entire time.

"That's not exactly what my family does. They work in real estate. Not that that's any better—they're a blight that does no good to anyone," Myalo continued.

Boys were treated coldly by witches, which may have explained why Myalo was so willing to insult his own family.

For a smart person, it didn't always matter what their family's line of business was or where they'd been born. They'd often find a way in life without needing the approval of their family members. Even if Myalo cut ties with them and was thrown out of the Knight Academy, someone with his intelligence was sure to find a way to get by.

In the case of a certain meathead, if he ever became a wretched vagrant orphan forced to rob stores as a means of finding food, he'd probably just freeze to death by the roadside come winter. The two were nothing alike. Myalo would likely rise to greatness once he found a merchant willing to accept him as an apprentice.

"So that's the true nature of witch families?"

I'll have to reassess my opinion of them. I took them for prestigious families of bureaucrats in respectable positions, like cabinet ministers. I guess you can't always get a good understanding of things just by reading a few books.

"That's right," Myalo said. "The Ho family is far grander."

"You think so?"

I wonder. I guess we're amazing in our own way. Even Rook, for all his flaws, takes his job seriously.

"Yes. The histories of chieftain families are filled with honor and glory. Witch families act as though they're special, but they do nothing of benefit to anyone."

Maybe Myalo's a fan of my family?

"Well, I appreciate the compliments."

"You're next in line to be head of your chieftain family, aren't you? You have such a wonderful future ahead of you." Myalo's eyes almost sparkled. He must've really looked up to knight families.

"That's assuming my cousin doesn't find herself a good husband."

That possibility still hadn't gone away. While Sham was at school, she could

fall for a talented and capable prince on a white horse, like a fated encounter from a book.

“Oh, I doubt that will matter. Given how gifted you are, I’m sure there’ll be no need to consider other candidates.” Myalo was showing a surprising amount of knowledge about my family.



“The thing is, I don’t actually want the role. If another candidate steps up, I’ll happily step aside.”

“Huh?” Myalo froze for a moment. “B-But didn’t you play a pivotal role when your father was chosen as successor?”

Is someone spreading rumors? That scares me. How’d Myalo ever find that out?

“Only because the other candidate was worthless trash. He might’ve taken revenge on us if we hadn’t completely crushed him there and then.”

“B-But...isn’t your incredible academic performance the result of you working hard to be a worthy head?”

I’m not working hard; I’m being worked hard. Not that it’s all that arduous. I guess I could refuse, but then what would I do instead?

“I’m going along with the arrangement because I’ve got time on my hands. I was originally planning to become the manager of a bird ranch, and I still haven’t given up on the idea.”

“A r-ranch manager? I can’t tell whether you’re serious or making a joke.”

“It’s no joke. You don’t think managing a ranch is a good job?”

Managing a ranch is a great job.

After living in the Ho family’s manor for a few years, I’d started to think that being a knight might not be so bad. I’d even started to hope for it. But even with the passage of time, I was still incredibly reluctant to become head of the family. I’d watched Rook in the role, and it didn’t look like fun. I didn’t consider him unfortunate, but he didn’t appear any happier than before.

On the other hand, we had much more cash to spare, as well as the privilege of being courted by high society. Also, Suzuya no longer had to wash clothes in cold water with her bare hands. But these things weren’t direct causes of happiness. Rook, Suzuya, and I all preferred our old life, I was sure of it. Managing a bird ranch seemed like such a better fit for Rook and me, to the point that I considered us more fortunate back then.

I wasn’t about to abandon my responsibilities after going so far to create this

path for us, but if someone exceptionally talented appeared to take my place, I'd happily step aside.

"Uh... Well, yes, it certainly is. But don't you want the position? You'll be the head of a chieftain family."

"I haven't decided yet."

My talk with Carol went just like this. All that stuff about, "You were born to a chieftain family and yet you possess none of the dignity of a knight. You're a disgrace."

Most boarding students were probably living aimlessly while following their parents' instructions, so my attitude wouldn't particularly bother them, but Myalo was the second or third highest-ranking student. He must've worked hard to get there. Much like Carol, he'd achieved so much by taking pride in all of his hard efforts. He might've even been the top student if I hadn't been here, so I had to choose my words carefully.

"It's not that I don't want the role, it's just that being a ranch manager felt like a better fit. Anyway, it all depends on my cousin."

"Oh... Well, it's really none of my business, but I think you'd be well-suited to headship. And not just because you can study—you're courageous too."

"Am I? I think I lack determination."

If I was courageous, my past life wouldn't have turned out how it did. I was trash who let authority figures control me, and then I turned into a shut-in because I couldn't get over being dumped by a woman. Hardly courageous.

"To be honest, the chances of my cousin finding herself a boy like that are slim. More than likely, I will be the head of my family someday."

That wasn't to say that there weren't any boys out there who'd want to marry Sham. There'd certainly be no shortage of men wanting to get together with her for her family's status, but that was no good. Unless Sham married for love, she'd be unhappy.

The potential groom also had to come from a suitably high-status knight family *and* needed to possess the unmistakable potential to become a much

better leader than me. Also, they couldn't be trash like Rakunu—I had to be sure that they'd leave Rook his territory and let us live in peace. The odds of someone meeting all of those criteria were astronomical. I doubted that such a person existed anywhere. That meant that the chances of Sham's husband becoming head of family weren't just slim, they were close to zero.

Given that I understood all of this, I probably shouldn't have been telling people I didn't want to be the head.

"Y-Yes... Indeed..." Myalo's eyes were glazed over and lifeless.

Why is all this such a big shock for him?

Ordinarily, entering the royal guard would be the most ideal future for someone like Myalo. He'd be so detached from matters of chieftain family headship that he had no need to worry about it. I could only assume that he loved chieftain families so much that the idea of someone not wanting to be in charge of one was unthinkable to him.

"How about we talk about course schedules instead?" I suggested. "It'll be nice if we're in the same classes."

"Y-Yes, let's do that."

V

Myalo and I had made and submitted our schedules together, and now it was the following day. I'd spent the night before in the dorm and on high alert, watching out for any attempted attacks from Dolla.

Although it wasn't a national holiday, the academy was closed. The new academic year would begin when the academy reopened from a long vacation tomorrow, and there'd be an opening ceremony the day after that.

I woke up early and descended the stairs to get breakfast. The smell of fresh bread baking already filled the air in the dinner hall.

But when I entered, something didn't seem right. There was a strange tension in the air. The mood should've been lethargic since everyone had just gotten up, but people were talking excitedly, as though something had gotten them

worked up.

I soon realized why. A very conspicuous, blonde-haired girl was having breakfast in the dining hall. It was Carol, the princess. The dorm's ten-year-old boys were all sitting some distance from her, as if they had no idea how to approach a girl of such dazzlingly noble birth. Nonetheless, they took great interest in her as they ate.

Carol's gaze met mine the moment I came down the stairs, and she more or less scowled at me. I half expected her to say hello, but she didn't, so I thought it best to avoid her. I chose to eat my perfectly ordinary breakfast as far away from her as possible. It wasn't long before I'd finished eating.

I got dressed and ready to head out, taking great care to avoid waking Dolla, who was still sound asleep. I left while it was still early morning and took the same route I'd taken after being sent home the other day. I soon arrived at the Ho family residence.

I hadn't been told exactly when my family was leaving this morning, so I worried I might've been late. Apparently I'd made it just in time, though, because the line of soldiers that were meant to escort Rook and Suzuya home were just about to set out.

"Hey. What's up, Yuri?" Rook was surprised to see me appear unannounced. He jumped down from the carriage.

"Good morning. I walked here hoping I might see you off."

"Oh. Did you sleep well?"

Before I could answer, Suzuya called my name as she hurriedly climbed down. Moving so quickly in the long skirt she wore was dangerous.

"Mom."

"Thanks for coming. Do your best at school," she said as she hugged me tight.

"I will. And you take care of yourself. Dad, I didn't have any trouble last night, so I think I'm going to be okay," I reassured him. I knew my words would put Suzuya at ease too.

"All right," he replied. "Just don't overdo it. Though I'm sure you'll be fine

whatever happens.”

“Yes, I think I’ll manage.”

“If it’s too much for you, just come home. It won’t be any trouble for us at all,” Suzuya said.

“I know. Could you let me go now, mom?”

I don’t want everyone thinking I’m some weird momma’s boy.

Suzuya released me like I’d asked.

“Both of you take care of yourselves,” I said while waving them off.

They set off with their procession of guards back to Ho Province.

Since I had the day off, I decided to spend the rest of it having fun.

That said, my only hobby besides taking care of eagles was going for walks, so I was just going to go on a stroll. Rook had already shown me all the impressive sights the capital had to offer, so I just planned to wander aimlessly and explore the various streets.

My brand-new Knight Academy uniform stood out too much, so I changed into some other clothes that I’d packed before I’d left the dorm earlier. I hid the bag I’d used to carry my clothes in a patch of long grass. I managed to slip through the busy front gate while the guards were changing shifts, which left me free to explore the city.

I went along while examining Sibiak’s stone buildings. Despite everything Myalo had said about witches running this place and making life tough for everyone, the royal capital appeared to be thriving. The stores allowed people to enter and leave freely, and food vendors had their wares on display in the front windows. This sort of setup wouldn’t have worked in a crime-filled city. At the very least, law and order here was sufficient for businesses to operate safely.

Either Myalo had been exaggerating—a certain level of order and economic stability was necessary for the witches to ensure their profits—or they feared the queen stepping in if they took things too far. It was hard to guess the answer just from seeing the streets. No doubt I’d come to understand things

much better after living here for over ten years.

I was getting further away from the Ho residence as I walked the streets, taking whichever turn took my fancy. I continued for some time. Sibiak had the layout of a planned city, and everything was so neatly arranged that I couldn't get lost.

I already knew that the streets became less safe further away from Royal Castle Island, especially in the western areas where the slums were located. That was why I headed east instead. More stores began to open for daily business as I strolled around.

A store soon caught my eye—a cutler that sold weapons. My habits over the past few years must've shaped my interests. I entered to take a look.

I was surprised to find folding knives out on display. I picked one up and noticed that it didn't even have a locking mechanism—it folded back into the handle easily when a little pressure was placed on the back of the blade. Such a tool might've been useful for turning fish into sashimi on a chopping board while out fishing, but it would be a terrible idea to use this thing in a fight. Even if it was all you had with you, the impractical design meant that you'd need more than a few spare fingers.

Hunting knives were also being sold alongside meat cleavers that a butcher might use. There were no tools with gut hooks; the type used for skinning animals. I imagined those would sell well, but then other stores would just copy the design. I abandoned the thought and left the merchandise behind.

The storekeeper looked concerned about seeing a child wander in to play with the knives, so I didn't stay long.

I walked a little further and found a store with various large piles of charcoal out front—black, white, and rounded pieces made from large branches. When I got closer, I caught its distinct, powdery scent. I didn't know much about the stuff, but it looked suitable for daily use around the home. I assumed that the black and white types had different uses.

There was also a store that appeared to sell old clothes that had been re-dyed. Outside, an eye-catching indigo cloth declared, "We Re-Dye Clothes" in white letters. The merchants here were finding ingenious methods to draw in

customers, just as they did everywhere else.

I walked further and found a tavern where several burly men sat out front drinking. That made me wonder whether I'd wandered into an unsafe area. There were various other stores besides the cutler, charcoal seller, and old clothes store, but they were all for commoners and their goods didn't look high-quality. I didn't feel like hanging around in case someone tried to steal my coin purse, so I decided to stick to looking around the stores in the safer areas until I became more familiar with the city.

I'd been heading to the southeast, rather than the west, but this looked like a downtown area. I turned around and began retracing my steps.

I'd only gone twenty meters or so before I heard a strange racket coming from a narrow alleyway. What sounded like a young girl screamed things like, "Waaaaah!" and "Let go!" Then there was a clatter, as though something had been kicked over. It sounded like someone being abducted.

So that kind of crime happens around here too. How horrible.

My family ruled over Ho Province, not royal territory. Sticking my nose in where it didn't belong—in other words, around here—would be like getting involved in another family's business. I decided that rather than dwell on what was happening, I'd pretend not to notice until I found someone to report it to.

But I just couldn't resist sneaking a glance into the alley where it was all going on. That was when I saw something that could only mean trouble—a mess of disheveled blonde hair.

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"Let go of me!"

"Hey! Cover her mouth!"

Maybe it's just someone else with blonde hair? I wondered. But no, it was Carol—sparkling brand-new Knight Academy uniform and all. *What's she even doing here? It's enough to give me a headache.*

When I thought about it rationally, I realized that we were unlikely to have bumped into one another if we'd left the academy separately, so she'd likely

followed me. What I really wanted to know was what she'd been thinking when she'd decided to do that.

A large hat had fallen from her head, so she'd presumably made *some* effort to hide her blonde hair. Unfortunately, wearing such a well-tailored hat in a region where barely anyone wore new clothes just made her stand out more. Plus, she was easy to kidnap because she was a child. She might as well have painted a target on herself.

"Ngh... Waaaah! Someone help!"

"Shut it."

Smack! One of the men—there were four in total—struck her with his palm. It connected with Carol's soft cheek as she screamed and struggled. He'd hit her full force. It must've hurt.

Wow, he got her good. I've felt like doing that myself sometimes.

"Mnngh, mnnngh!"

In the short period that Carol had been stunned by the slap, a dirty rag was forced into her mouth to gag her.

Well... I can't just leave her.

The smart thing to do might've been to walk off like I didn't care, then return to tail them back to their den. But I worried about how the kidnappers might react when they realized Carol was a princess. There was every chance they'd decide to kill her. Abducting a princess and then holding the kingdom ransom was a crime way beyond mere kidnapping. They'd be hounded to the ends of the earth. But the dead tell no tales, so killing her would lower the chances of them being identified.

I might've been able to discover their lair and inform the authorities, but Carol could be dead before anyone had time to rescue her. I couldn't pay the ransom myself either. I'd happily leave it to the royal family to fork over—maybe it would teach them to be more careful in the future—but I'd regret leaving her if she was killed. In fact, I was only guessing that they planned to hold her for ransom. I couldn't be sure they weren't a bunch of pedos who just wanted to have their way with a young girl.

In any case, it would be too risky to take my eyes off them while they had Carol.

“What are you looking at, brat?!” one of the men yelled when he noticed me leaning against a wall and calmly analyzing the situation.

Carol noticed me and desperately tried to cry for help. “Mhh!”

“Um, are you kidnapping her to hold her for ransom?”

The man only made a noise in response to my question. “Huh?”

If they weren’t willing to talk to me, I’d have to do some explaining first.

“The truth is, I’m one of that unruly girl’s servants. If you’re kidnapping her, then I’m sure her family will pay the ransom, but if you intend to force yourselves on her, your crime won’t go unpunished.”

“We’re after the ransom,” he answered willingly.

The man who spoke was the one who’d slapped Carol a moment ago. He seemed to be the boss.

He was oddly calm considering this was a kidnapping. Perhaps my lie made him think that requesting a ransom was going to be easy. He regarded me with an unnervingly cold stare. I’d seen eyes like that often among the Ho family—he looked like a soldier who’d made it back from the battlefield. I didn’t fear the others, since they looked like weaklings who were in over their heads. But I wasn’t sure whether I could best this particular man.

Hmm... He’d make a tough opponent. I’d better not fight him.

“Nggh! Mmmmh!” Carol was desperately trying to tell me something. Nothing helpful, I was sure. It was fortunate that they’d gagged her.

“Then perhaps you’ll take me with you? I’m worried about her. You’ll gain a higher ransom if you have us both.”



“Now tell us who you are.”

They’d bound my hands behind my back, blindfolded me, and brought me here. Now the small-time crooks were interrogating me. Their boss kept his

distance.

They clearly had no idea that the blonde girl they'd found wandering around downtown was the queen's eldest daughter. They must've taken Carol for a stupid girl who'd wandered off from some high-class family.

Either they were reluctant to question her, or they worried that injuring her might lower the value of the ransom. For now, I was the one being subjected to a harsh interrogation. They might've gone easier if I actually cooperated, though.

"Who?" I echoed. "You know, I think I've forgotten."

"Start talking, kid!" the man smacked me across the cheek, knocking me over.

Jeez, that hurts. Good thing I'm used to pain already. This would've terrified me back before I met Soim.

"Mmmmmh!" Carol cried and did her best to scream.

The last thing I wanted was for her to tell them she was a princess.

Come on guys. I'm clearly not talking, so stop hitting me. You know what you need to do.

"See what he's got on him. There might be something to tell us who he is," the boss commanded.

Finally.

"All right, boss," the crook replied promptly. "On your feet!"

With that, he yanked me up from my chair. This was just what I wanted. I'd been waiting for it. They'd searched Carol right away, but since they thought I was a mere servant, they hadn't checked my things yet. There was a hurdle that I couldn't deal with until they did so.

"Huh? This is fancy... Hey, he's rich."

As the crook searched my pockets, he found a purse and dagger, which he placed on a table.

Now how will they react?

"This dagger... The girl must be one of the Hos," the boss said.

Wow. He actually recognized my family crest...

A metal fitting engraved with the family crest was inlaid into the dagger's hilt. Now I knew how to deal with the complications it caused. The royal family apparently wasn't so concerned about weapons. Carol's dagger was very well-made, but it didn't have her family crest on it. It turned out my belongings were more revealing than hers.

"Well, the secret's out. The girl here is Sham Ho, daughter of the Ho family's previous head."

Since I was left with no other option, I decided to make use of Sham's name. I'd been hoping that I could pass Carol off as a daughter of one of the seven witches, such as the Cursefit family, but I couldn't have done so too early. If I'd told him that before anyone looked at my dagger, my family crest would've contradicted me. That's why I had to sacrifice my cheek while I waited for their reaction. I hadn't actually expected these small-time crooks to be familiar with the Ho family crest.

"Then...that makes her Gok Ho's daughter?"

Huh? He's heard of Gok? How's he know so much about my family? That's creepy.

"Yes, that's right," I said.

"But she's got blonde hair. Isn't that a sign of royal descent?"

"Her paternal grandmother was born to the royal family. Her mother, too, is a distant relative of the royalty. Lady Sham has royal blood."

Obviously, this was a lie, but I'd be very surprised if they knew what my family tree looked like.

"Ah... Ha ha. Who'd have thought I was abducting *his* daughter?" There was a note of self-loathing in the boss's laugh. I got the impression that he'd known Gok personally.

Those who'd fought under our family and survived in battle could expect to enjoy greater wealth in their future because they'd likely be promoted when the family's army was restructured. It was hard to imagine why a Shiyaltan

veteran would have to resort to abducting people. Then again, it was possible that he was a soldier from the Kilhina Kingdom.

“We’ve gotta eat somehow. Nothing personal,” he said.

“Are you going to do something I might take personally?”

I thought he might’ve let us go if he felt indebted to the Hos, but no such luck.

“No. Just collecting that ransom.”

Carol and I were then imprisoned in a storeroom. There was a window that had been haphazardly sealed shut. Columns of light shone in through a large gap in the woodwork and illuminated the floating dust.

Although our arms were still tied up, our legs weren’t. Maybe they didn’t want the trouble of dragging us around whenever we needed the toilet.

“Why’d you get caught? You could’ve escaped without me,” Carol muttered.

She sat in the corner of the room with her knees raised to her chest. I could’ve explained that they might’ve killed her—or worse—if they’d realized she was a princess, but I figured she was too young to understand.

“You would’ve preferred it if I didn’t save you?”

“That’s not what I mean. You wouldn’t have been caught if you’d abandoned me. And you wouldn’t have gotten hit across the face like that...”

You’ve hit me across the face yourself! Carol did at least appear to feel guilty about what we were going through, so I kept that thought to myself. *But why would I abandon her? What type of person does she think I am? I saved her back during the entrance ceremony too. Why does she keep classifying me as subhuman trash? What did I ever do to her?*

“Because we know each other, kinda. And it’s my fault for not realizing that you were following me,” I explained.

“I-I wasn’t...” Carol buried her face into her knees in embarrassment now that her following me was out in the open.

I figured it was better not to give her a hard time over it. I wanted to say a few things like, *at least change out of your uniform, or, use your head next time*, but

I kept those feelings inside. I'd been bottling up so much lately that I worried I might eventually explode.

"We'll be all right. You don't need to get so down."

"We'll be all right...? We've been kidnapped. Think how much the ransom will be..."

"If all we lose is money, then we've gotten off lightly. Anyhow, we might get rescued."

"Maybe you're right. My escorts might come looking for us..."

She has escorts? It looked like she was eating breakfast all by herself this morning. Are there secret service members hiding around the dorm? Well, I doubt they'd let the princess go off stalking someone—she must've given them the slip.

"Then let's hope your escorts save us. I'm from a family of warriors, so getting kidnapped and held for ransom won't be good for my reputation."

"Oh... This'll damage your reputation? Sorry..." Carol sounded genuinely apologetic.

"Forget it. Do you know how to fight, Princess?"

"Don't call me that. Carol is fine."

"Okay... Carol."

Getting on first-name terms with her like this feels a little awkward.

"Can you fight?"

"I thought I could... But I froze up when it mattered. It made me wonder what all my training's been for..."

She's received training? What kind?

Mine had come from Soim. In my final lesson, he'd made me fight bare-handed against an adult prisoner wielding a staff...although he probably would've stepped in if he had to. Soim tended to go to extremes.

"Well, you can't help that."

“There’s no excuse... It’s shameful...”

The highborn princess was holding herself to excessively high standards once again. After all, how many ten-year-old girls were capable of fighting with adult men?

“Well...” I couldn’t think of anything to say to console her. There was no denying that Princess Stalker had gotten herself into this situation by following me. Whatever I said would probably do more harm than good.

After we’d waited quietly for a while, we finally heard some noise from the next room. The kidnappers had been talking in hushed voices, but now we heard some movement. First, there was a clattering sound from a chair or some other object hitting the ground as they moved it. Then there was a *bang*, as if a door had been closed.

“Would you mind getting on your hands and knees under that window there?”

Carol raised her head.

“Huh...? Why?” she asked distrustfully.

“If you’re really sorry for getting me caught up in all this, then get on your hands and knees. And hurry.”

“Guh... H-Hands and knees...?”

“I’m not going to stand on your head and make you apologize. Just do it. We don’t have time.”

“F-Fine...” Carol reluctantly got down on all fours. “This is h-humiliating...”

I stood on Carol’s back, then got on my tiptoes so that I could see through the crack in the shoddily patched window. We appeared to be on the second floor, facing out onto a back alley. When I pushed my face right against the crack, I could just about see what was below us.

I saw the boss walking through the alley. Luckily, I could recognize his clothes.

“Ngh.”

After I got off Carol’s back, I started fiddling with one of my fairly long sleeves.

My hands were still tied behind my back, but that didn't stop me from pulling out something I'd hidden in my cuff.

"What do you think you're doing? You can't use princesses as stepping stools."

The tool—something that resembled a ring attached to a short metal saw—had been sewn into the hem of my sleeve by a single thread. It was designed to help Ho family members escape if they were ever taken captive by the Kulati. I'd heard several stories of people using it to break free after being bound up.

"Give me a moment. Now that he's gone, I can handle this."

I broke the string and pulled the small saw out. Once I had it in my hand, I pressed it to the rope that bound my arms and moved it back and forth with small movements. The ring allowed me to apply a good amount of pressure, and I could feel the blade digging deeper and deeper into the narrow rope.

This wasn't a task that required extreme amounts of time and patience—I managed to break free in about fifteen minutes. The tool had served its purpose.

"How...?" Carol was dumbfounded by the sight of me with my arms free.

"Keep your voice down," I whispered while working to untie Carol.

"You...this whole time..."

"Every adventure starts with some preparation."

Getting kidnapped had been just as much of a risk for me as for her, so I'd prepared myself ahead of time. I'd set out feeling confident that I knew how to deal with every scenario within reason, though I hadn't banked on a member of the royal family stalking me.

"But now what?" she asked. "Can we get out the window?"

"It's the second floor, so that won't work."

We could've broken the window open, but the ground was quite a ways down, and the opening faced out onto an alley with nothing but houses around it. In other words, there were no large eaves or anything that we could jump down onto.

“You’re going to fight?” Carol asked.

“Well... Maybe...”

There was still one cause for concern. I crouched down and squeezed Carol’s thigh with both hands.

“Wha—”

Next, I patted her butt. Her muscles were firm, and her lower body was in good shape. I felt sure she could outrun a few ill-trained adults.

“What are you doing?! Blackguard!”

Smack! Carol hit me across the head as hard as she could.

Whoa. She’s making too much noise.

“Does a maiden’s honor mean nothing to you?! Pig!” Her face had turned bright red with fury.

I hurried over to the right side of the storeroom doorway.

“Quick! Pretend your arms are still bound!” I urged while gesturing by putting my own wrists together.

Carol still had *just* enough presence of mind to suppress her anger and put her arms behind her back.

She was so loud. All I did was touch her butt. Oh, wait...that would make her mad, wouldn’t it?

“Keep it in your pants, you filthy brat!”

One of the crooks clearly thought I was up to something unspeakable. He entered through the door beside me, fuming with rage.

“Huh? Where’s that dirty ra—”

As soon as he’d stepped into the room, I kicked him as hard as I could, aiming for the back of his knee.

“Ngh!”

I didn’t give him time to form words. The kick made him buckle, and his shoulder tilted backward. I grabbed it and pulled him down to the ground. As he

fell, I claimed the dagger—well, more of a hunting knife really—that he'd been wearing at his waist. To finish, I plunged it into his thigh before withdrawing it.

“Gah... The little shit stabbed me!”

With the boss gone, his gang of crooks had apparently seized the opportunity to sit down and play cards. Now that one of their members was down, another quickly stood up and came dashing at me. He pulled out a similar weapon from his pocket, so I threw the knife in my hands.

Knife throwing was a special sort of skill, but even a clumsy attempt with no chance of sticking the target would be enough to scare them.

“Hah?!”

The crook used his own blade to repel my knife, but by then I'd already gotten close. I kicked him in the groin before he had a chance to use the weapon he was holding.

“Guh-gaaah!” he screamed and curled up into a ball.

“Carol! Let's go!” I yelled.

“Hold it, brats!”

There was still one last thug to deal with, but the man who was currently on the ground clutching his crotch had been the one blocking our escape route. The remaining crook had drawn his weapon, but he was too cowardly to charge at me.

When I looked around the room, I noticed our belongings—both our daggers and our coin purses—had been gathered in two neat piles on a table in the corner. They'd been left in plain sight, which suggested that the boss had full trust in his men.

Carol came running out of the storeroom as I snatched up our things, but the man I'd stabbed earlier grabbed her by the leg to stop her leaving.

“Get off me! You lowlife!”

As Carol shouted, I threw an earthen pot toward them, and it hit the man on the arm. He released his grip, setting Carol free.

The coward who'd been afraid to come at me must've thought Carol was an easier target, but I threw another sturdy, glazed pot at him when he tried to go for her. I heard it shatter as I unlatched the door and kicked it open.

"Carol! This way!"

"R-Right!"

As Carol came out, I took a handful of coins from my wallet and threw them on the floor. Hopefully, the crooks would stop to pick them up.

Although we'd been blindfolded, I'd paid attention to the route when they'd led us through the building, so I knew where the exit was. I ran down the stairs of what I imagined was some kind of apartment building or warehouse. The exit door was unbarred, so we easily got out.

"Whoa," a voice said.

I turned right and was faced with the boss who had left just a short while ago. I thought he'd gone to confirm our identities and decide on a ransom, but maybe he'd forgotten something, because he was back already.

"Carol! This way!"

"Wait!" he cried.

I grabbed Carol's arm and ran along the alley in a direction that took us away from the main street. I'd also made sure to throw the exit door wide open, hoping it would block the narrow alleyway.

We ran for about six meters before arriving at a sharp right turn in the alley. There was a gap between the buildings on the left too, but it was barely wide enough to fit my arm into—only a rat could've gone that way. We had no choice but to go right.

But before we continued, I looked back and saw that the door was still wide open.

"Carol, stop."

"Wh-Why?"

He's not chasing us. But why not?

If a complex series of branching streets lay ahead, he'd have to worry about losing sight of us. But even if this led to a dead end, there was no reason not to follow. That meant that this alley would probably take another right turn and lead out onto the main street. There we'd find the boss waiting to cut us off.

"We're heading back," I declared.

"Are you—"

"I'm sure."

Carol was hesitant to head back toward the enemies we'd just escaped from, but I didn't have time to explain it. I pulled her by the arm and ran back through the alley.

After violently kicking the door out of our way, I saw the alley straight ahead of us was deserted.

"Let's go," I blurted out before running out onto the main street.

I looked to my left. Sure enough, the boss was on the main street, waiting for us to emerge from another alley.

"Wait! You damn brats!" he cried when he spotted us.

He began to chase after us. I reached into my wallet, pulled out several gold coins, and threw them onto the street.

We ran as fast as we could, leaving a trail of coins in our wake. The boss ignored them as he chased us, but the same couldn't be said for everyone else. The sharp-eared paupers in the area heard the clatter of gold coins hitting the paved ground. They descended on them in a frenzy, blocking the boss's path and preventing him from catching us.

I repeated the same trick as we ran. We lost him quickly, but that didn't mean we were safe just yet. We kept running for as long as we had the energy to.

Carol was the first to give in. "Hah, hah, wait. Wait up."

We'd made it far. I was also tired and starting to run out of breath. I was a confident long-distance runner, so Carol must've trained hard to have been able to keep up with me.

I looked back for signs of anyone following us. “Haah, haah... I think...we’re fine now.”

We’d been following one of Sibiak’s curved streets, heading north, until we reached one of the major streets that radiated out from the city’s center. The region grew safer the further we traveled.

In fact, this was a familiar street. I remembered visiting it with Rook, and knew we were near the capital’s center. We were likely to encounter soldiers from the royal guard here. The risk of being kidnapped was gone.

“Hah... I’m exhausted...” Carol panted. “Is he...still following?”

“I’m sure he’s given up.”

We must’ve run for three kilometers. The sun was setting, so the crooks had very little chance of finding us now.

Up until now, I’d forgotten that I still held Carol’s dagger at my waist. I returned it to her. “Here.”

“Th-Thank you...”

I was just as happy as she was to have my dagger back. I could always make up for money I’d lost later, but the dagger that Soim had given me was irreplaceable.

“I’m starved. Wanna grab food before we head back?” I suggested.

We hadn’t eaten since breakfast, so we were both fairly hungry.

“E-Eat and then go back?”

It was possibly Her Royal Highness’s first time going out to get food.

“This is all I’ve got left,” I said, reaching into my pocket to produce a silver coin. “We can’t afford a fancy restaurant, but it’s enough to get something.”

“Are you serious? Even after all that just happened?”

“You’ve gotta be hungry too,” I said.

Carol patted her stomach as if consulting with it. “I am.”

“There’s a place over there. I’ve been there with my dad before.” I pointed to

a restaurant where I'd once eaten with Rook.

Carol's blonde hair caused quite a stir when we entered the restaurant, but we were shown to a table—a secluded spot in the back for two—without anyone complaining about our lack of adult supervision.

"Now, what to have..." I muttered to myself.

"I-I've decided already. Meat pie." Carol sounded nervous. It must've been her first time after all.

I guess I'll have the same.

"Excuse me." I raised my hand and a server came to take my order. "One meat pie and, um...two cups of milk."

"Yes, sir. One meat pie and two cups of milk."

"Will this be enough?" I showed her the silver coin.

"Of course, sir," the server immediately responded.

I already knew from checking the prices on the menu that there'd be change left over from a silver coin, but showing the staff that I had money would put them at ease. They were bound to get a lot of homeless children coming in and trying to eat without paying.

"Very well. Your food will be with you soon." The server bowed to us and then went to give our order to the kitchen staff.

"You're...awfully calm after all that..." Carol sounded impressed.

"Calm? I'm still a little jumpy to be honest."

"Really?"

I was all too aware that I hadn't settled down yet. I felt light, as though my feet weren't quite touching the ground.

"I've never been through anything as intense as that. I feel good about myself now," I said.

Carol, on the other hand, seemed down, as if she was still worried about what might happen to us next.

“I see... You sounded confident the whole time. I thought maybe that was an everyday thing for you.”

“As if.” I laughed. *What war-torn country does she think I’m from?*

“But still, you didn’t panic.”

“Because I knew that only one of those men had any experience,” I replied.

Despite being unskilled, they’d tried to bind me up rather than kill me. I knew that I’d find a chance to run away at some point.

“I see... I’m new to this. All I did was panic...”

She sounded remorseful, but if anything should’ve served as grounds for some soul-searching, it wasn’t her hysteria at being kidnapped—it was her stalking. But I kept that thought to myself.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re lucky no one’s going to be angry with us. Everything worked out great.”

“Uh... A-Are you saying we should keep quiet about this?”

Now Carol appeared to be scared. Everything that had happened had left her feeling guilty.

“You shook off your escorts, didn’t you? Let’s say... Oh, I know—let’s say you got lost while exploring the hidden areas of the academy. It’ll explain why your clothes got dirty too.”

“B-But lying is...”

“After dealing with everything by ourselves, we’d have to be stupid to let ourselves get punished for it now.”

“B-But I don’t think it’s right. My escorts must be searching high and low...”

“Ah... Hmm...”

The escorts assigned to the princess might’ve been some of this kingdom’s most elite soldiers. Fooling them would prove difficult, especially since Carol had been running around the city with her blonde hair exposed.

I didn’t feel like I’d done anything to make them angry at me, but I could still be blamed for going out without permission and then getting myself into

trouble.

“Honestly, if we act like nothing happened, I doubt we’ll get in trouble. You didn’t cause problems for anyone.”

“Oh, I think I did.”

“If anyone can be annoyed about that, it’s me, right? You probably caused a lot of fuss, but what’s it matter if your escorts are panicking? If I can get over it, then so can they.”

“Are you sure? Oh, here it comes.”

The same server came back with a tray of food.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Meat pie and milk for two.”

The server picked up the two cups of milk in one hand, placed them on the table, and then did the same for our food.

The large meat pie, which had been cut evenly into four pieces, sat imposingly on the plate. I’d worried that one might not have been enough, but this was going to be filling. It was also still sizzling hot, with clouds of steam rising from its surface. I was pleased to know it had been freshly baked.

“Thank you,” Carol said.

“Thanks.”

The server bowed and then left us.

“All right, let’s eat,” I said.

“Okay. It looks delicious.”

Carol took her knife, cut a small portion off the edge of the pie, stuck her fork into it, and lifted it to her mouth. As you’d expect from royalty, her movements were elegant and graceful.

“This is good. The flavor’s so rich.”

I tried some too and found that it really was tasty. I was glad we’d chosen it.

I was thirsty, so I lifted up the wooden cup, which was shaped like a small tankard, and tried the milk.

Carol was about to sample hers, but she seemed to be having trouble. She tried to drink from it while pinching its metal handle between her fingers, but it must've been too heavy for her, what with it brimming with milk and all.

The table manners she'd been taught probably hadn't included any instructions for drinking from overly large cups. These were probably made to hold beer—they were too big to be suited for a child's drink.

"Why not just grip the handle properly? I doubt your table manners were designed for tankards."

"You're right. I'll try it."

Carol fretfully gripped the cup with her hand and lifted it to her mouth. She took a few gulps before putting it back down on the table and dabbing her mouth with a napkin.

"There you go."

Her manners were as refined as any royal family member.

Before I could compliment her on it, there was a *bam* as the door to the restaurant flew open. The sound of boots thumped in the restaurant.

"Princess Carol!" someone cried loudly.

I looked up and saw a pale-faced woman—fairly young, but obviously still older than we were—standing over us.

We'd entered the restaurant with Carol's blonde hair on full display, but I hadn't expected to be found so quickly. Then again, anyone escorting a princess had to be exceptional.

"Where in the world have you been?!" the woman demanded.

"Uh..."

She looks like a little girl about to cry because she's been caught doing something naughty.

"I was t-taking a look around the city."

"Have you no idea how dangerous that is?! Return with me immediately!"

"Please wait," I said.

“Hm?” The woman looked at me.

“She may be royalty, but wouldn’t it be awfully disrespectful toward me if she were to get up and leave while we’re in the middle of our meal?”

The woman’s face turned into a scowl. “And who do you think you are?”

“It’s not a matter of my status. I’m simply expecting a member of the royal family to show a reasonable level of etiquette.”

“Well, you’ll have to excuse her.” The princess’s escort showed the bare minimum amount of courtesy toward me by bowing slightly.

“I think not,” I said, preventing her from taking Carol away. “Unless there’s an urgent matter or a war has broken out right here, leaving a meal halfway through isn’t something I can excuse.”

“Oh?” She clearly hadn’t been expecting that reply. She stood there dumbfounded.

“This area is quite safe, and there’s no emergency to the best of my knowledge. If there’s no good reason for leaving so soon, then shouldn’t the lady be allowed to finish the meal first?”

“The lady happens to be a princess of the Shiyalta Kingdom.”

“Is she? I’m Yuri Ho, by the way—heir to the headship of the Ho family.”

I took out my dagger from my pocket and laid it on the table so that the Ho family crest was visible.

Carol’s escort never could’ve expected this urchin with dirty commoner’s clothes and a bruise on his cheek to be the heir of a chieftain family. She looked quite surprised.

“I say it once more: I consider leaving the dinner table in the absence of an emergency to be rude behavior. I ask that you wait for us to finish eating.”

The escort just looked at me. She was hard-pressed to respond.

Admittedly, I was talking nonsense and being needlessly argumentative, but I knew that the escort couldn’t disagree if I called something ill-mannered and then backed up the claim with reasoning. Rudeness was subjective; if I acted

offended there was little point in explaining why I shouldn't be.

"Very well... I'll wait."

She'd given in. She knew better than to ignore objections from the heir to a chieftain family. On top of that, I was one of Carol's new friends.

"Actually, I'd prefer it if you could wait outside. It's hard to enjoy our meal when there's someone souring the atmosphere."

For a moment, the escort appeared shocked. But then she simply made a brief check of the restaurant to ensure no one looked suspicious and left without a word.

Everything was peaceful once more.

"See? Tell her you did nothing wrong and she can't be angry with you," I told Carol.

"You're unbelievable."

"We've already had our day off ruined by a bad experience. We should at least enjoy a good meal before we head back."

"Well...maybe you're right," Carol mused while taking another piece of pie.

Royal cuisine must've used more subtle flavors, because it looked like she really enjoyed the pie. This sort of simple-yet-tasty dish was ideal for a child's palate.

Once we'd finished, I thanked the server. "Thank you for the meal. Please keep the change as compensation for the trouble."

All I had was one silver coin, so that was what I placed down on the table before getting up.

The escort outside had been glaring at anyone who'd tried to get near, so we'd had almost the whole restaurant to ourselves for a while.

"Sorry for the trouble. We really enjoyed the food." Carol gave the staff a slight bow before leaving.

"You're finished now?" Carol's escort asked me as we emerged.

She'd been standing outside as if she was the restaurant's gatekeeper. There

was also a carriage waiting with the royal family crest emblazoned on it.

“Yes, we are. It was a very enjoyable meal. Now, if you’ll escort me home,” Carol replied.

“Yes, Your Highness. Your carriage awaits.”

As she boarded the carriage, Carol turned back to look at me.

“Yuri Ho. Thanks for today. I had fun,” she said to me with a grin.

It was the first time I’d seen Carol smile.



Afterword

I'd like to express my gratitude toward those who've chosen to read this humble work.

This book was originally serialized on Shosetsuka ni Naro starting in 2015, and I've continued to write more whenever circumstances have allowed for over five years now. This is my first time getting a book published as an author.

To begin, please allow me to tell something to all of you, dear readers.

This book would never have been published if it hadn't caught the attention of an editor at Overlap. I expect that it had done so because the title was high in Shosetsuka ni Naro's rankings table. Reaching that position was, of course, thanks to all the ratings left by my readers.

This work was initially lost among the mountain of contributions that are made to Shosetsuka ni Naro each day. It was hidden among them—just one of the many.

It was all of the readers—the ones who've supported me—who dug this work out from that mountain, read it, rated it, and raised it up high enough to be exposed to the light of day. It goes without saying that it would still be buried right now were it not for your support.

You may be reading the book, but I don't know whether you're one of those who picked it up on Shosetsuka ni Naro. If you are, then it's thanks to you that this book was published. That's the first thing I wanted to express. Although each individual reader may have played just a small part, it's the support of those individuals that made the publication of this book possible. I am truly grateful to you.

Now, as you'd expect from a work serialized for so long, this book was based on writings of mine that were made five years ago.

It was written so long ago that when I re-read through parts that were to be included in the book, I found much of the content wasn't good enough. I

couldn't just leave those parts as they were, so I revised the sections that were redeemable as best as I could and even added new plot twists.

For those who haven't read the Naro version of this story, I expect that if you ever do, you'll often find yourself thinking, *I can see why this part wouldn't work...*

In fact, I would appreciate it if you'd wait for the publication of volume two before reading more of the story—it's embarrassing.

A lot of pages have been allotted to the afterword, so I'll continue writing. I'll talk about how I first had the idea for this work.

The ideas at the root of this work were conceived of back in the summer of 2014. By some strange circumstance, I was traveling alone to Europe, tasked with investigating a sudden loss of communication with a European company.

I learned the cause simply by traveling to the location and spending half a day in discussions—there were no great hurdles to overcome, no strange twists, no comedy, romance, or mystery. Put simply, it was a small company reliant on a company president who'd died in a traffic accident, and no one in the company besides the president was able to speak English, so no one else was able to handle communications with their Japanese associates. That was all there was to it.

I'd employed a Japanese person via the internet to act as a guide prior to my arrival, and they turned out to be so competent that I finished up my work in just three days. It gave me the chance to enjoy a solitary trip to Europe, complete with a free flight.

During the day, I walked through the streets of Europe for the first time, and at night, I shut myself away in a guest house thinking about a novel.

It all started with a phrase that popped into my mind: "The world longs for a conqueror."

Common sense will tell you that conquering means war, which normally includes an aggressive invasion, so it's hard to imagine a country or region that actually wants to be conquered. But when you extend the concept to revolutions, you find that many conquests have succeeded because of a latent

desire for change among a nation's citizens, and so I began thinking that the concept itself might be interesting to explore.

I worked on this idea and came up with a scenario to go with it, but by that point, the phrase I was working with no longer felt right as the work's title. That's why there's no trace of it left now. Still, it remains within the foundations of the story's scenario.

In this fictional world, technology and intellect are progressing slowly but steadily, while an outdated governmental system threatens to forget about its people. It's not enough to make the citizens explode with rage, but they live with pent-up frustrations. That's how their world is.

To everyone who chooses to read this, I would be delighted as an author if you were to find their world enjoyable.

I still haven't filled up all the afterword space, so I'll end by telling a story about a recent event.

One day, I was at my parents' place. I felt quite hungry, and there was a dessert that had been left on the living room table since the day before, so I ate it without stopping to check who it belonged to.

The next day, when I headed out by car with my father, he asked me, "Did you eat that dessert in the living room?"

"Yes. Did you buy it?" I replied.

"The other day I went out for my late-night run like always."

He'd begun talking about something seemingly unrelated for some reason. Running was my father's latest craze. He usually set out around eight at night and followed the same set route.

"I was sweating and coming close to getting home. Suddenly, someone in a car who was approaching from behind called for me to stop," he continued.

Oops—I've run out of afterword space. I'll put the continuation in the next afterword. Hopefully, I'll get the opportunity to write the rest.

Thank you for reading. I do hope that you'll continue to read my works in the future.



This was an ever-changing panorama,
unobstructed in all directions.

Everywhere I looked, my view was clear,
and the world was breathtaking.

An illustration of the Ho family in a fantasy setting. On the left, two women, Satsuki and Suzuya, stand in traditional robes. On the right, a man, Rook, stands in a brown and yellow outfit. In the foreground, two children, Sham and Yuri, are crouching. A large, stylized bird is in the background. The scene is set in a village with a building and trees.

SUZUYA

ROOK

SATSUKI

YURI

SHAM

The Ho Family

One of the knight families that governs the kingdom's armies. The family is tasked with dispatching reinforcements to foreign nations and therefore has an exceptionally high amount of war experience.



“Carol! This way!”

“R-Right!”

CAROL

Bonus Short Stories

How a Princess Became a Stalker

Carol found herself in a ridiculous situation after she'd quietly sneaked out of the dorm.

Yuri Ho had left the dorm this morning, and Carol had decided to follow him for the sake of her training.

It had started off well enough, but—rather than going around the back of the school building like Carol had expected—Yuri Ho had left the academy grounds and entered some residence that she assumed belonged to the Ho family.

Just when Carol had concluded that Yuri Ho was just visiting his parents and she was about to head back, he emerged from his residence once more. This time, he wasn't wearing his uniform, so it was obvious that he wasn't going back to the dorm. Carol was so curious that she couldn't help but continue to follow him.

And now, here she was—stuck in an unfamiliar part of the city and too lost to turn back.

Although Carol had grown up in the royal capital, she'd rarely had the chance to set foot beyond the boundaries of Royal Castle Island. She'd visited holiday homes and a handful of stores licensed to serve the royal family, but everything else was always left entirely up to servants. Also, needless to say, her few excursions had been made in a carriage.

She knew the city's layout in the form of maps she'd memorized, but she had no idea which area of the map she was actually in now.

The commoners—who wore clothes far shabbier than anything she'd ever seen in the royal castle—constantly stared at her, as if there was something unusual about her.

From her hiding place, Carol studied the shop that Yuri Ho had entered. It had

an array of blades on display. The store had no doors, giving it a wide-open feel. A thief could have easily walked right in. Yuri had simply strolled in, then left a little while later without buying anything.

What's he doing here? Carol had initially thought he'd left the dorm to train by himself, but now she was at a complete loss.



Yuri Ho did nothing but look around at various stores. He didn't even appear to be searching for anything in particular—he was just killing time.

He made it seem natural, as if he'd grown up among these streets and was right at home here. Or maybe he was a solitary tourist who was here to take in the sights. Whichever it was, he blended in so well that the vast majority of people simply passed him by without glancing his way.

It was the complete opposite of Carol's experience. Everyone who passed by glared at her suspiciously. She'd hidden her hair inside a large hat, but it couldn't cover it completely. Plus, her eyes were still an unusual color.

She could already sense an acute threat of danger. She wanted to run, but the problem was *where* to run to. She'd followed so many twists and turns down the road that she didn't even know whether it was better to run straight ahead, or to turn back first.

By this point, she wished that Yuri Ho would turn around and notice her; her pride still prevented her from calling out for help.

It was then that an arm wrapped itself around her waist while a cloth-covered hand clapped over Carol's mouth.

"Mmgh?!"

She was lifted up and dragged into a narrow alleyway where several men surrounded her.

"Waaaah! Someone help!" Carol screamed.

She suddenly felt a powerful shock across her cheek. Her vision was blurred by tears as she failed to hold back an instinctive and infantile reaction.

"Mgh."

A moment later, there was a gag tied around her mouth, and her arms were bound.

No... I'm finished.

But then she looked down the alley and saw a familiar face looking at her in surprise—it was Yuri Ho.

“Mmmmng! Mmmng!” She tried to cry for help, but the words were muffled.

Yuri Ho looked at her with an expression of deep disappointment. He was no doubt carrying a dagger, but he didn't draw it. Nothing suggested he was about to save her. If anything, it looked like he was about to head home.

Just as Carol had lost hope, and her heart had started to fill with despair, Yuri Ho opened his mouth to speak.

Carol's Bedroom, the Morning the Eagle Arrived

“Your Highness, it's morning,” one of the veteran maids, who lived in the royal castle, said as she opened the curtains in Carol's room.

Dazzling light flooded in.

“Ummgh... Mor...ning...?”

“Are you feeling well? I hope you're not falling ill.”

“Sleepy...” Carol mumbled while rubbing her eyes.

Her body felt heavier than usual, and she struggled to wake up. The bright sunlight did little to bring her around against her body's demands to go back to sleep.

“This is what happens when you stay up too late,” the maid scolded her sternly.

Carol had been too excited to sleep the night before—the thought of getting her own kingeagle today had kept her up.

“Come on. It's time to get up. You mustn't anger Her Majesty again.”

“Okay... I’m getting up...” Carol blinked repeatedly as she climbed out of bed.



A sandwich—made with slices of cured ham, cheese, and vegetables layered between freshly baked bread—was placed in front of Carol.

She wiped her hands with her napkin before picking up the sandwich. Her governess, who was watching her eat, immediately gave her a lash on the arm with a wooden rod. It hit her with a *thwack*! Although it didn’t actually hurt, Carol found it irritating.

“What’s the problem? You told me I could eat these with my hands. Are you teaching me lies?” Carol asked.

“Indeed, I did teach you that sandwiches can be eaten with your hands.”

Carol didn’t understand.

“However, this is an exception,” her governess continued. “You should understand how important it is to examine your food and imagine the outcome of eating it before attempting to satisfy your hunger. What do you see within that sandwich?”

“It’s...meat, cheese, and vegetables.”

“The meat is known as cured ham. If you’re of the opinion that you’re capable of biting through it, then I shan’t stop you from eating the sandwich in its current form. However, please consider what might happen if you fail to bite through it—will you remove the piece of meat from your mouth and continue to eat the rest? Will you pull the remainder of the meat out from the sandwich to eat all at once? Or will you continuously gnaw on the sandwich to break it apart? All are ghastly options, are they not?”

“Then get the chef out here! It’s his fault for making it like that!” Carol was hungry and irritable. There was no mistaking her bad mood.

“Would you say the same if such a dish was served to you as a guest in another household?”

“Ugh... Mnngh!” Unable to think of a sensible retort, Carol just grumbled angrily.

“Go ahead and cut it with your knife before eating.”

“Forget it! I don’t want it!” Carol shouted to vent her frustration. She was so angry that it was ruining her appetite.

The governess, in a sudden change of attitude, crouched down beside Carol’s chair to apologize. “My apologies, Your Highness. That was unfair of me. If I speak harshly to you, it’s merely because I wish for you to become a fine lady, Your Highness. I’m truly sorry. Please eat it as you see fit.”

“Mngh...”

Carol was still frustrated, but now she felt there was no way she could simply bite into the sandwich. In the end, as much as it pained her to do it, she picked up the knife just as she’d been instructed and cut off a bite-size piece from the sandwich.

The moment it entered her mouth, she tasted the delicious combination of salty ham, a variety of sauces, and cheese.

Once she’d finished chewing the first piece, her stomach no longer felt so empty.

“Once I’ve eaten, I’m putting on my eagle riding clothes!”

“You are...?”

“It’s my day off, right? I can go to the barracks and see the eagle when it comes.”

Carol had no study sessions scheduled that day. It shouldn’t have been a problem for her to visit the barracks.

“Um, well...” The governess faltered. She pulled on a chain that led to her pocket, which produced a pocket watch. She checked the time before adding, “I expect the eagle won’t arrive for another three hours at the very least.”

“What?!”

“The Shiyalta Kingdom is vast. Even if the seller were to have departed from the ranch at 5 a.m. this morning, he wouldn’t arrive for another three hours. It’s quite possible he hasn’t even departed yet, as he was merely asked to make the delivery before nightfall.”

“Oh... In that case, I’ll stay here for two hours, then go wait at the barracks.”

“Are you certain, Your Highness? I warn you, you could be waiting outside for most of the day.”

“The eagle’s coming here from far away to be my precious pet. Won’t it feel sad if I’m not there to meet it?” Carol replied, as if what she’d just said was simply common sense.

“Perhaps it’s for the best that you can spare such thoughts for those in your service... You must excuse me, because I’ll need to make preparations. Please be sure to finish your meal.”

The governess pinched her skirt with both hands, gave Carol a ladylike curtsy, then left the room to arrange an escort for the princess.

An Afternoon around the Togi Board

I was playing togi with Myalo in the dorm’s lobby.

“So the Tena Kingdom had a witch for a queen?”

“That’s right,” Myalo replied while moving a piece.

Figures he’d move there.

“One of the grand witch families of Tena had been selected to become royalty. Their kingdom had twelve witch families instead of the ‘Seven Witches’ we have. Of those, several later fled to Shiyalta, and two still exist today.”

“Mmm...” I mumbled. I thought for a little longer, then moved a piece. “And those families now make up part of the Seven Witches of our kingdom?”

“Of course not. The Cartelaether family barely still qualifies as a witch family, while the other apparently switched to some new line of work that... Hmm, this is complicated. The state of the board, I mean.”

“Why not do this?” Carol—who’d been watching me and Myalo play our game the entire time—reached over and moved one of the pieces.

“Don’t be stupid,” I said while shifting one of my pieces and then another of Myalo’s. “See how these three moves make it so my eagle’s threatening him?”

I'm keeping it there to stop him making that move."

"Ahh. Right... Hmm..."

Carol reverted the pieces back to their original positions, apparently unaware that I'd just called her stupid—she was completely absorbed in the game. I couldn't understand how she could concentrate so well and yet still suck so badly at togi.

It'd make sense if she was as dumb as Dolla, but Carol was smart. She always grasped things quickly, but for some strange reason, she went from mastermind to ditz the minute she looked at a togi board.

"Then I'll do this," Myalo declared while placing a piece down with a *clack*. "Naturally, witch fortunes largely consist of real estate and other assets that they can't take with them. By the time they need to flee from the war, they're forced to abandon most of their wealth because it's impossible to sell. They leave with only what they can carry. The family's status suffers a great decline in the process."

"Then if he moves there, he's gonna do that..." Carol muttered to herself.

"But they'll still be rich, right?" I asked.

"They'd certainly be able to put food on the table for generations to come if they'd be willing to live in an affordable commoner dwelling. But these people are used to luxury; they can't change so easily. Most families only last about three generations."

"Hmmm..."

It was my turn once again. Myalo had just fallen into the trap I'd set, so I knew what to do without much thought.

"Ah, so that's your plan?" he said.

"Yep."

"Hmm... Well, in that case..."

Myalo and I were evenly matched players. I lost to him about as often as I won, but I had him this time.

“Looks like I can’t—”

“Wait!” Carol blurted out, suddenly cutting Myalo off. “Here, right?” she asked while moving a piece.

It almost hurt to watch her. I wanted to tell her to use her brain, but I knew she must’ve put a lot of thought into the strategy. After all, she’d been sitting beside us muttering to herself the whole time. Personally, I could’ve done without it.

I could say she knew just enough to be dangerous, but a player as bad as her wasn’t a threat to anyone. I couldn’t understand how or why she’d pick such a stupid move.

“You know, Carol...” I began. I was about to tell her that she could be really dumb at times, but then I thought better of it. It was a mean thing to say to someone making a genuine effort to learn. Instead I opted for something a little more diplomatic. “It’s an option, yes, but you should consider this too.”

I moved a different piece, then undid Carol’s amateur choice so I wouldn’t have to look at it anymore.

“Huh? Why there?” Carol asked in confusion.

“I concede,” Myalo said. “You’ve played well, as always.”

“Because then it’d go like this,” I told Carol, shifting several pieces around to show her.

“Yes, we’d reach this arrangement. But then I’d have to...” Myalo trailed off as he moved a piece on his own side of the board. He demonstrated that he was now restricted. “And then I’m left with no way of winning. Yuri has beaten me.”

“Ha ha... I get it,” Carol murmured in admiration.

Did she get it? Probably not. I’m sure she felt like she did, though.

Myalo Gudineil Takes the Exam

Myalo Gudineil had nervously sneaked into the examination hall that day. All of the other children had arrived with their parents. Myalo was the only

one who'd come to the exam alone.

"My name is Myalo. I'm here to take the exam," he said to the receptionist while standing on tiptoe. His heart was racing as he worried that he might be turned away.

"Ah, yes. Please guide this boy to the exam room, would you?"

The receptionist gave Myalo a wooden tablet with the number thirty-six written on it. It was an examinee number.

It was fortunate that he'd arrived while it was crowded. In their haste, they'd let him through without any consideration. If his surname—Gudinveil—had caught their attention, it might've raised suspicion, but luckily they just focused on his first name.

"Please come this way." The busy-looking guide appeared indifferent to the fact that Myalo wasn't accompanied by a parent and had no one here to see him off.

They entered a large room where a long line of children sat on a long bench and answered the problems they'd been given.

The guide soon led Myalo to an empty spot. Some writing implements and a piece of wood with the problems written on it were already there.

"These are the exam questions."

Myalo glanced over the set of questions briefly. The information he'd been given in advance was true—they were all very easy. He knew the answer to each one without having to think, so he completed everything in just a few minutes.

"I'm finished," Myalo said.

"All right. This way please," the guide said, sounding a little relieved. She must've been glad that Myalo had been so quick given how busy they were with all the examinees.

Myalo took the wooden plank to the front desk and handed it to the examiner.

The old examiner merely glanced over Myalo's answers and said, "To room

number one.”

The secretary sitting by the examiner looked for a number in the list and then wrote another number next to it.

“I’ll take you there.”

Myalo followed the guide once more as she led him out of the room.



Myalo entered a classroom with a lot of other students—likely those who’d answered every question right in the first test—and sat down on a chair.

These children—soon to be fellow students in his year, if everything went to plan—chatted to one another to pass the time.

Unsurprisingly, everyone who’d been brought to this particular room knew how to conduct themselves well enough that they weren’t being obnoxious. No one spoke too loudly or played games.

There were no doubt several important figures among them, but there would only be two children with positions of greater esteem than his at this exam. The first was Carol Flue Shaltl, a member of the royal family. The other was Yuri Ho, the current heir of the Ho family.

Rumor had it that Yuri Ho had been given a boorish upbringing, raised in an environment little different from a farm. Since he’d apparently only had two years to study, there was no guarantee that he’d make it to this room, and it was possible that he’d be placed in a lower class.

There’d been other rumors about him too, so Myalo was curious to learn what sort of person he was. Some said he was a prodigy with staggering wisdom, though others said he remained an uneducated boor. But conflicting rumors were to be expected given that hardly anyone in the royal capital had actually met the boy for themselves. Likewise, Myalo couldn’t know what sort of person Yuri Ho was until they’d had a chance to speak to each other.

The exam answer sheets had been passed around while Myalo was thinking.

Myalo’s family circumstances had made it difficult for him to study much in preparation for the Knight Academy exam. He’d looked over some of the

required texts in the Grand Library, but there'd been no one to help him understand their contents.

He looked over the questions and found them as difficult as he'd expected. As he tackled them, he managed to solve them one after another. Although there were a few that he worried he hadn't quite understood, he'd answered them regardless.

When Myalo had answered seventy percent of the questions, there was a noise as someone stood up.

He looked to see a black-haired boy walk toward the front desk with an answer sheet in his hand. He calmly handed in the answer sheet and then left the room.

Either the high difficulty had made the boy give up, or he'd actually answered every question already. Whatever the case, it made Myalo deeply curious. He made sure to remember the boy's face.

The Little Mathematician by the Pond

I was walking around behind Ho Manor when I happened across someone I hadn't expected to see.

It was my cousin, Sham, crouched by a pond and gazing into the water.

"What're you doing?" I asked casually.

It wasn't like Sham to act like this—in fact, it wasn't like her to set foot outside at all. And while ponds were certainly one of nature's beautiful offerings, this one wasn't worth admiring. It was in a sorry state because no one had thought to look after it.

The pond had originally been created as a precaution in the event of a war. If flaming arrows were to set the manor on fire, it might've burned down too quickly for anyone to fetch pails of water from a well. It'd been made deep to ensure there'd always be enough water, but that complicated the task of draining and clearing it. A few fish could be seen in the water, but even those had been stocked purely for emergency reasons—in other words, in case we needed to eat them.

I still couldn't tell whether Sham had noticed me as she threw a pebble into the pond. It sank to the bottom with a *plop*, leaving ripples across the water's surface.

"I'm trying to come to terms with the fact that circles are transcendental numbers," Sham said before throwing another pebble into the pond.

Several concentric circles appeared on the water's surface.

"O-Oh... I see."

"Wouldn't it be beautiful if a circle could become a square?" Sham muttered.

Sham was thinking about the classic problem of "squaring the circle." Put simply, the problem asked whether it was possible to draw an arbitrary circle and then construct a square with an identical area.

Squares were beautiful shapes. Circles were too, but their areas couldn't be represented without the use of pi and all the mysterious numerical concepts that came with it.

If a human could take a circle and replace it with an equivalent square, it would be quite a feat. It would be as though that person had somehow taken the troublesome concept of a circle and tamed it single-handedly.

But it was impossible. It simply wasn't possible to construct a square with area equal to the circle because pi was a transcendental number.

More accurately speaking, it was possible to construct squares with areas increasingly similar to that of the circle using a ruler and a compass, but to make it truly identical required an infinite number of operations, putting the task beyond human capabilities.

Sham had been familiar with the problem since a long time ago, but it was only yesterday that she realized it was impossible.

I sort of understood why that was sad, but in all honesty, I'd never been that hung up about math. I didn't understand why she was so upset by it.

Sham threw another pebble into the pond, as if this one might bring her some answers.

"Sure, the idea feels kinda beautiful because it's something always out of

reach. But if squaring a circle was easy, it'd be boring, wouldn't it?" I said.

"Would it? I don't think I can forgive the one who designed a world like this. Not that I know who that would be."

She's blaming a designer now...? Don't tell me this is a full-blown sulk. It's cute, but a little taxing.

"That famous mathematician probably felt just like you do right now when he begrudgingly acknowledged that irrational numbers exist," I said.

In this world, there'd once been a great mathematician who'd denied the existence of irrational numbers entirely. Unlike Pythagoras, he'd eventually come to accept them, but only after losing a fierce debate with a rival, after which he was said to have committed suicide.

"That's probably true."

"I'll bet all great mathematicians worry about it at some point. All your idealized rules don't quite conform to reality."

"G-Great mathematicians...?"

I looked down and saw Sham smiling.

That got to her. I know her too well.

"Look, you'll come to terms with it eventually."

I decided I should throw a stone myself. I found a nice-looking one near my feet and gave it a mighty toss toward the pond with my arm held low. The stone hit the water at a low angle, and—although it wasn't flat—it struck the water's surface with a *smack* before bounding across to the other side.

"Thinking about imaginary numbers is just—"

"Wait, what did you just do?" Sham asked, cutting me off.

"What, you've never seen anyone skip stones before?"

"I've been here throwing stones for two hours and the thought never occurred to me."

Sham tossed the stone she was already holding by using a throw similar to mine. Although she'd been watching the water rather than my hand when I'd

thrown my stone, she must've intuitively understood the physical phenomenon. She chose her throwing style while being aware that the angle at which the stone met the water was important.

But her attempt lacked strength, and the stone traced a parabola before disappearing into the pond with a *plop*.

"How do you do it?"

"Just hold the stone low and use some force. Choose a flat stone and then throw it so it'll hit the water with the surface tilted a little."

I pelted another to show her how it was done.

"I see. I understand the principle."

Sham picked up a stone at her feet and tried once again.

I watched her and was surprised to find that she'd gotten the body movement right. Perhaps it was due to Gok's blood—the blood of a great warrior—that flowed through her veins. I'd barely ever seen Sham engage in any physical activity before, but she might've been surprisingly coordinated.

The stone she'd tossed curved slightly before it hit the water and barely skipped on the surface before going under.

"It bounced!" Sham cried. She must've been embarrassed by her childlike reaction, because she quickly hid her excitement.

"Nicely done," I replied while patting her on the head.

Sham remained bashfully, but happily, quiet.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1 — Birth](#)

[Chapter 2 — The Succession Council](#)

[Interlude — The Night following the Turmoil](#)

[Chapter 3 — Everyday Happenings](#)

[Chapter 4 — Knight Academy](#)

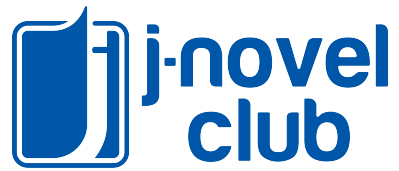
[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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The Conqueror from a Dying Kingdom: Volume 1

by Fudeorca

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